

[著]  
安里アサト

[イラスト]  
しらび

[メカニックデザイン] I-IV

86

— エイティックス —

The dead aren't in the field.  
But they died there.

[EIGHTY  
SIX]

ASATO ASATO PRESENTS



The number is the land which isn't  
admitted in the country.  
And they're also boys and girls  
from the land.

 電撃文庫

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# 86

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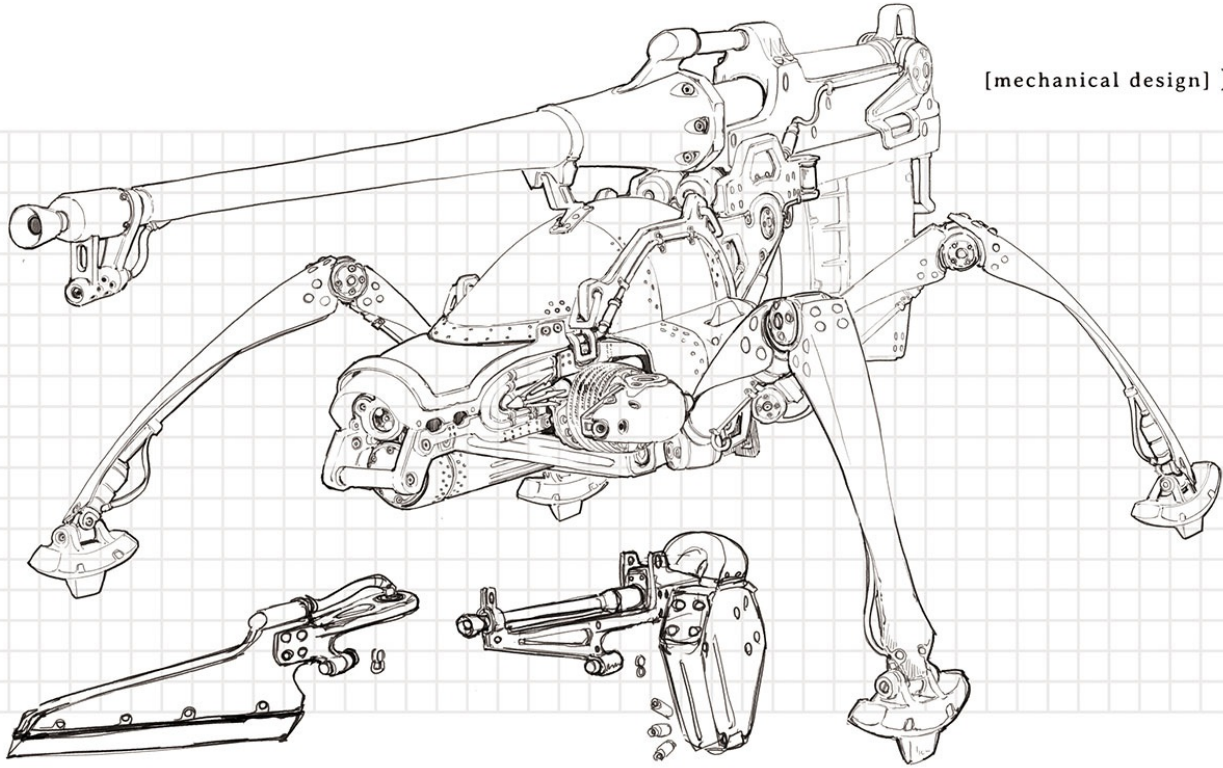
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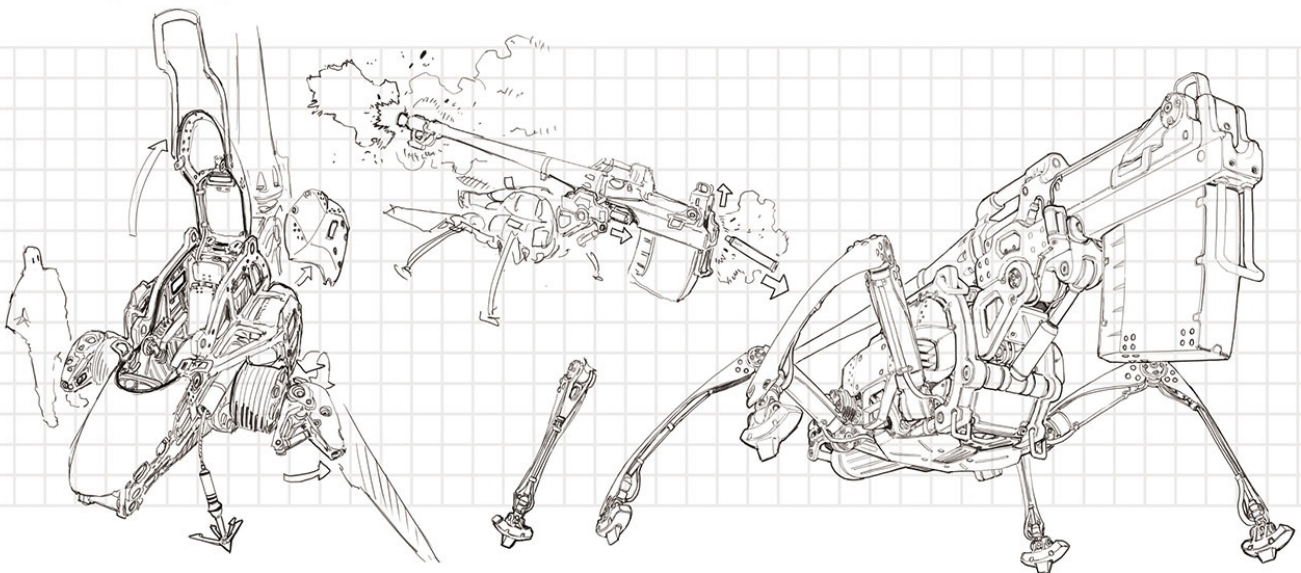
## **“Unmanned machine” Produced by the Republic of San Magnolia M1A4 Juggernaut**

### **Specs:**

Manufacturer: Republic Military Industrial (RMI)  
Length: 10.7m/ Height: 2.1m (excluding mount arm ar-  
mament)  
Fixed Armaments:  
Combat subarms equipment:  
High frequency blades x 2 or 12.7mm heavy machine  
guns x 2  
Wire anchors x 2  
Back gun mount arm (typically for a 57mm smooth-  
bore cannon)

Note: This “unmanned” machine has the bare minimal  
armor, and contains no safety devices like air bags  
or ejector systems.

The “M1A4 Juggernaut” appearing  
in this work is a drone unique to  
the Republic, but this is merely a  
“facade.” In fact, the Republic  
had failed to develop combat ca-  
pable AI, and in the face of the  
looming threat from the Legion,  
the Republic made an irre-  
versible decision, to have the  
fiendish thought “as  
long as the ones seated inside are  
not human, those are unmanned  
drones.” Thus, the outcasts of the  
Republics (unpersons), Eighty  
Sixers shared the fates with  
these machines, running amok all  
over the battlefield.



# 86

The dead aren't in the field. But they died there.

[ EIGHTY  
SIX ]



[ Lena ]

Actual Name: Vladlena Millize. Republican Soldier, an elite who rose to the rank of Major at the young age of sixteen. Commander of Shin and the "Spearhead" Squadron, who are far from the Republic's lands, through the long-distance communication function of the Pallet.

[ Shin ]

Actual Name: Shinei Nouzen. A boy affiliated with the 86th zone, commonly known as an "Eighty Sixer," and acts as the leader of the battle squadron "Spearhead." Continued to live through countless battles through amazing piloting skills. Personal Codename is "Undertaker."

ASATO ASATO PRESENTS

ILLUSTRATION/SHIRABI

MECHANICALDESIGN/I-IV

C H A R A C T E R S

The number is the land which isn't admitted in the country. And they're also boys and girls from the land.

The two of them continued to fight each battle. For the girl, it was with "tears." For the boy, it was with 'death'. While both of them are unable to see each other—

SPEAR HEAD

The eastern front The first ward The first defensive squadron



Seo

Typically a calm boy, but still as expressive as anyone of his age. Personal Codename "Laughing Fox."

E316-00383

Kaie

A girl with a tom-boyish tone, never one to mince her words. Personal Codename "Kirschbluten."

Raiden

Vice-Commander of "Spearhead," Shinn's support. Personal Codename "Werewolf."

E247-51103

Daiya

A tall, lanky boy. Always prone to awkward situations. Personal Codename "Black Dog."

E163-42144

E130-37131

Haruto

Always enthusiastic, a boy who sets the mood of the squad. Personal Codename "Falko."

E085-36525

Angel

Posh and calm, not inferior to men in combat. Personal Codename "Snow Witch."

E107-77023

Krena

A girl who specializes in sniping. Somewhat admiring of Shinn. Personal Codename "Gunslinger."

E100-30103

Eighty Sixers

The people who live outside the 85 legislative zones of the Republic, in the "no man's land." They live in Concentration Camps, and those healthy are forcibly conscripted to fight and die against the enemy drones <Legion>. The "Spearhead" Squadron led by Shinn continued to live through countless battles, and they are a squad of elites, each with aliases, or personal codenames.

86

—エイティックス—

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EIGHTY SIX

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ASATO ASATO PRESENTS  
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ILLUSTRATION/SHIRABI  
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MECHANICALDESIGN/I-IV  
[メカニックデザイン] I-IV

DESIGN/AFTERGLOW

# Prologue - The Poppies Blooming Red on the Battlefield

No country will scoff at the notion of denying pigs human rights,

Thus,

As long as their language differs, their skin color differs, their ancestors are deemed to be of different tribes, they will be found pigs taking on the appearance of humans. By suppressing and slaughtering them, surely there is no issue per say with regards to human rights violations.

*~Vladlena Millize (Memoirs) <System start.>*

*<RMI MIA4 <Juggernaut> OS Ver 8.15.>*

A wireless signal sounding way behind the times echoed amidst the deafening noise.

***“–Handler One to Undertaker. Enemy intercepting forces detected on the radar, comprising of battalion level anti-tank artillery and close combat hunters.”***

*“Undertaker here, understood. Detecting movement here.”*

***“Henceforth, all authority shall be deferred to the field commander. For the sake of the country, eliminate the enemies of the Republic even if it means sacrificing yourselves.”***

*“Understood.”*

***“...My apologies, everyone. Really sorry.”***

*“Ending transmission.”*

*<Cockpit sealed.>*

*<Power Pack activated. Actuator active. Unlocking joint structure.>*

*<Stabilizer normal. Frame Check Sequence clear. Vetronics offline. Hunting mode.>*

“This is Undertaker to everyone, Handler One has handed command. Undertaker shall take over command.”

*“Alpha Leader here. Roger that. Same as usual, ‘death god.’ Right, what are the final orders of that shitty pampered Princess?”*

*“Really sorry.”*

A cackle could be heard from the other end of the ballad.

*“Pff, same old hopeless white pig. See no evil, hear no evil, what the hell was that apology for... lads, you hear that? Well, we’re gonna die either way; don’t think it’s a bad thing for the death gods to lead us down the Styx.”*

“Sixty seconds until frontal confrontation... under enemy fire. Breaking through enemy artillery fire at maximum speed.”

*“Alright, let’s go you guys!”*

*<Combat Maneuver Open>*

*<Detected enemies: Designating B1” “Designating B2” “B3” “B4” “B5” “B6” “B7 “B8” “B9” “B10” “B11” “B12” “B13” “B14” “B15” “B16” “B17” “B18” “B19” “B20” “B21” “B22” “B23” “B24” —....>*

*<Engage: B210>*

*“This is Delta Leader! Don’t let them get around. Wipe them out here!!”*

*“Charlie Three! Enemy at ten o’clock! Evade—dammit!!”*

*“Echo One to squad. Echo Leader is KIA. Echo One shall take command.”*

*"This is Brave Two... sorry everyone. End of the line here."*

*"Alpha Leader here. Hang on for a minute, Alpha Three! Sending reinforcements now! Alpha One shall take command!"*

*"—Roger that. Good luck Alpha Leader."*

*"Leaving it to you... hey Shin. Undertaker."*

*"What?"*

*"Don't forget the promise."*

*"...Ahh."*

*"C1: Signal Lost."*

*"Friendly units: zero"*

The commander's voice came ringing through the noisy headset, which was removed from the head and placed by the side, merging with the breeze of the sunset.

***"...This... is... Handler One. All forces, do you hear me? First Forces, please respond."***

The organic being on the machine's cocoon-shaped belly opened the canopy, reached a hand out from the cockpit, and reached for the button of the communicator.

*"This is Undertaker to Handler One. All attacking enemies eliminated. Confirming enemy's retreat. Operation over. Ready to return."*

***"...Undertaker. Is there, anyone else?"***

*"Ending transmission."*

He cut off the communications before hearing the end of this foolish question, which he had no need or obligation to hear.

The red Poppies were blooming across the horizon under the evening hue. The stoking flames stretched the shadows of the iron beasts and quad-pedaled

spider carcasses that were partially collapsed onto the ground, the insides visible through delicate angles. Friend or foe, such was the outcome for them.

No living thing could be seen anywhere. No matter where, however distant the place, all that lingered were corpses and wandering souls of these corpses.

A cruel silence beckoned. At the ends of the grassland, past the mountains that were like black shadows, the setting sun offered crimson light across the horizon.

Lit by the crimson light, or shrouded in the black shadows; only he and the machine were the only sources of life in this world that had practically severed ties with Life.

The long slender legs mimicked an Arthropod's. The rusted armor covered with stains had countless scars upon it, the high-frequency blades akin to crab legs, and a main cannon on the back. The silhouette resembled a wandering spider, the long cannon atop the frame supported by the four legs resembling a scorpion, and appeared to be a skeleton wandering across the battlefield, seeking its lost hand.

He let out a sigh, leaning on the deck that had cooled in the night breeze, and shriveled up under the evening hue, lifting his head at the burning sky.

These flowers were born from the blood of the beloved Consort who killed herself, as a parting gift to the Conqueror in a country of the Far East.

These flowers bloomed in the blood of the Knights who were massacred by the invading barbarians.

The crimson red of the Poppies bloomed across the battlefield, so maddeningly beautiful under the evening hue that seemed primed to burn the sky down.

# Chapter 1 - The battlefield With Zero Deaths

On that battlefield, there were zero dead.

*“—Now then, today’s battle reports.”*

*“The Empire’s unmanned armored corps <Legion> invaded the seventeenth area, and were repelled and exterminated by the automated drones of our San Magnolia Republic. In contrast, our side has suffered minimal casualties, and none KIA—”*

Located in the first area, the capital of San Magnolia, was the Main Street of Liberté et Égalité, so peaceful and elegant it was impossible to imagine this country being in a state of war over the past nine years.

The white façades of the ancient-stone Western-styled buildings had various carvings upon them. Under the Spring sunlight and blue skies, the greenery of the trees and the antique rusted black street lamps formed a contrast with the blue sky. At the café located at the corner of the street, there were students and lovers, born with silver hair, laughing and chirping away.

Situated on the blue roof of the city hall was a statue of the revolutionary Saint Magnolia and the five colored flag, symbolizing freedom, equality, fraternity, justice, and purity. The stone tiles on this main street extended straight out to the suburbs, paved after much careful city planning.

A young man with silver, moon-like eyes was passing by, his hands held by his parents as he passed by, laughing out loud.

Perhaps they were simply out on a stroll. Lena smiled at the family, and turned back to the massive holographic television screen, the smile wiped from her white-silver eyes.

This sixteen year old girl was dressed in the Republic’s cyan-collared female

officer uniform. She had a snowy white pretty face, as delicate as glass, the elegant demeanor of hers a testimony to her noble upbringing. The silky silver hair of hers had light curls and the luster of satin, and she had large eyes that were of the same color, beneath her long eyebrows; such were the proof that she was one of the nobles with the Selena blood, a pureblood, of those who lived upon these lands long before the Republic was born.

*“Under the outstanding leadership of Handler, the high capability drones continue to battle, capable of completing the mission to defend the country without having to send into manpower to the dangerous frontlines; truly the capabilities of this advanced combat system are undoubted. It is likely that the <Legion> will cease operations two years in the future, but surely the evil Empire shall be vanquished by the organization of justice that is the Republic. Vive San Magnolia. Glory to the five-colored flag.”*

The Alabasta-type female broadcaster with snowy white hair and eyes showed a proud smile, yet Lena’s face was shrouded in gloom.

Such a battle report kept airing over and over again ever since the war started, so much that it was more surreal than just optimistic, yet most of the citizens had no further doubts about it. Ironically, the reality was that, half of the Republic was conquered six months once the war started, its boundaries pushed back; ever since then, the lands were unable to be reclaimed.

And furthermore,

Lena turned her head around, looking over at the Main Street shrouded in the light of Spring that was akin to a portrait.

The female broadcaster, the students and lovers in the café, the pedestrians walking down the streets, the family that just passed her by, and Lena herself.

As the first modern Republican country in the world, San Magnolia boasted itself for accepting immigrants from other countries and rewarding them. The Republic was historically a nest for the Albas, and other countries had people of different skin colors living there. Whether it was the Aquilas who were as dark

as the night, the golden light of Aurata, the bright red Rubella, or the Caerulea with refreshing blue eyes, they welcomed Colorata of all colors within their borders.

But at this point, on the bustling Main Street of the capital, no, even in the capital, or all eighty five legislative zones, none that were not a silver-haired, silvered eyed Alba could be found.

Yes. Of the soldiers that were officially listed as humans on the battlefield, it was true that there were zero KIA to be countered.

However.

“...What kind of zero KIA is this?”

A corner of the Blanc Neige Palace that had existed since the Imperial era, the military headquarters designed with dazzling late Imperial era design was Lena’s destination; located in this palace was the Great Fortress Cluster, the <Grand Mur>, surrounding all the political sectors, and all soldiers of the Republic were there.

Outside the <Grand Mur>, on the frontlines more than a hundred kilometres away, there were no soldiers stationed. The only ones on the frontlines were “Drones” — the “Juggernauts” — and command was carried out in the control room of the country. There were at least a hundred thousand people controlling the “processors,” and lined behind them was the defense line comprising of anti-personnel/tank mine area, automated interception cannons. They had yet to fail before. Of course, the forces inside the <Grand Mur> had never experienced a single battle. The other positions were simply to introduce processed operation strategies in a manner akin to logistics. The Republic Army at this point had no personnel in actual combat positions.

Lena scented upon the pungent stench of alcohol breath from the passing officers, and frowned. It was likely they had been watching sports on the large screen in the commanders’ room. She gave them a reproaching look, only to be met with sneers.

“Look at this doll lover.”

“Oh, scary... are you going to keep talking with the important drones you keep in your room?”

She turned back without a second thought.

“All of you—”

“Morning Lena.”

A voice came from the side, and turning around, she found her peer Arnett.

The technical Captain of the research department was the only one of the same age and year as Lena, her only friend of the same year.

“...Morning Arnett. Sure woke up early when you always sleep in.”

“I’m going back. Spent the entire night working.... don’t associate me with those idiots. I’m working. We’ve got a problem only this genius technical Captain Anrietta Penrose can solve.”

Arnett let out a yawn like a cat. She had short, Selena silver white hair, and large eyes that were of the same color.

During the greeting, Arnett glanced aside at the drunk officers who slipped away, and shrugged, her eyes basically saying it was pointless to lecture such imbeciles. From those silver eyes, Lena realized that Arnett was trying to stop her, and went beet red.

“Ah, speaking of which, you have an alert on your intel terminal. I’ll help you settle it.”

“No need for that... sorry, and thanks for that, Arnett.”

“No problems. Try not to get too close to those drones though.”

Lena wanted to respond, but shook her head, and went to the control branch she was affiliated to.

The cramped room that was occupied by inorganic controls was dark and damp. The hologram main screen on standby gave a faint light, and the floor and walls were silver.

Lena sat on this futuristic armchair, put on the stylish looking ring, the RAID

device, combed her long silver hair behind her, and proudly looked up.



At this place, where the frontline was far from this <Grand Mur>, this cramped room was the only battlefield within the Republic's eighty five areas.

"Begin identification. Major Vladlena Millize. Commanding Officer of the Eastern Front, ninth battle area, third defense forces."

After the voice and iris verification, the control system was activated.

Following that were massive bundles of data appearing one after another on the hologram screen, obtained from the observation auxiliaries installed at the distant frontline. Appearing on the main screen was a digital map showing all the blinking spots, indicating forces of both ally and foe.

There were seventy blue spots showing allied machines, and of those, twenty four were in the third squadron under Lena's charge, while twenty three were under the second and fourth squadron respectively. The red spots indicating enemy forces were overwhelming in numbers.

"Para-RAIDs activate. Synchronize target, 'Pleiades' central processing unit."

The blue crystals at the nape of the RAID device immediately sizzled. This was not heat coming from the crystals themselves, but a hallucinatory heat where the senses were being activated and synchronized in this Para-RAID process.

The amplified virtual nervous crystals began to calculate. Through the established virtual nervous system, a specific part deep within the brain was being activated, the Nighthead (unused regions), one abandoned in the long process of evolution or forgotten in the tide of time.

It passed through Lena's consciousness and subconsciousness, seeping further within. Typically, it was impossible to access that section consciously, but the "passage" of the collection of subconsciousness, the "subconsciousness" shared with all of humanity, was gradually opened, connected towards the consciousness of the third squadron commander's Personal Name "Pleiades" processor

The senses of the "Pleiades" were one with Lena.

"Para-RAID complete. Handler One to Pleiades, Please take care of me today."

Her voice was calm and stable. After a pause, the "voice" of a youth, about a

year or two older than her, responded,

*“Pleiades to Handler One. Para-RAID is fine.”*

That “voice” sounded sarcastic. Lena was the only one in the control room, and this voice was not from anyone else; instead, it was the voice of the “Pleiades” processor unit that had synchronized with the senses, giving an audio hallucinatory effect.

A voice.

This “Juggernaut” built in hasty response to the war had no communicative functions. It had no complex thought ability that could be considered feeling or consciousness.

This Para-RAID was derived from the collective consciousness of the **human race**.

The **anti-personnel** landmine zone, a defensive line set up to withstand the enemy armored forces.

That was an intense frontline where drones on both sides massacred each other, zero KIA, but in fact,

“Sure is tough work to studiously greet us Eighty Sixes who resemble humans, Albas (humans).”

Eighty Six.

They were the last bastion of paradise the Republic (humans) were left with when the ‘Legion’ swept the continent — human shaped pigs resting in the unhuman zone (eighty sixth legislative zone) beyond the eighty five legislative zones.

That was the derogatory term used for the Colorata, those who were living as citizens of the Republic, yet deemed inferior to humans by their own countries, living outside the compulsory shelters outside the <Grand Mur> and on the frontlines.

Nine years ago. Year 358 of the Republic's calendar, Year 2139 of the Anno Astrum.

The Northern continent country, the Geade Empire bordering to the East of the Republic declared war in all directions. The first wave of completely unmanned battle drones <Legion> forces began invasion.

Faced with the overwhelming forces of the military superpower Geade, the Orthodox Army of the Republic crumbled in half a month.

Back then, the military gathered all of its manpower, and as they continued with demoralizing delaying tactics, the Republic government made two decisions.

One was to evacuate all Republic citizens to the eighty five legislative zones.

The other one was to initiate Presidential Order 6609, the Special Wartime Security Act.

This Act had all Colorata residing in the Republic deemed as enemies allying with the Empire. They were rid of their citizenship, watched over, and isolated in the shelters outside the eighty five areas.

Surely this was a betrayal to the legislation and five colored flag the Republic was so proud of. Any and every Colorata born of the Empire, except for the Albas, were dealt as beings to be contained, so brazenly a case of human discrimination.

Naturally, the Colorata protested. However, the government suppressed them through military might.

There were quite a few Albas who protested. However, the majority of the Albas permitted it. The eighty five legislative zones were unable to contain the needs of all its people after all, whether it was resources, land, or positions.

The rumors of Colorata Spies ruining their country was much easier to accept than admitting the harsh reality that their country had fallen behind.

And with the enemy forces laying siege on them, humans needed scapegoats to vent their rage and resentment..

Racial supremacy instantly gained recognition and justification. This noble, regal, and humane first modern Republic established in the world ended up recognizing Albas as the most outstanding of them all, while all Colorata of the old-fashioned, inhumane Empire were inferiors, who were simply foolish, barbaric swines who took on human appearances and could not evolve successfully.

All Colorata were contained in Concentration Camps, and while serving in the military, they had to build the <Grand Mur> fortress walls. All property of the Colorata was confiscated and appropriated, while the citizens heaped praise upon the humane government for allowing them to evade military service, labor, and additional wartime taxes.

The discrimination against Colorata and Eighty Sixes (inferiors) occurred amongst the Albas two years later. They had the soldiers, all members of the Eighty Six, on active service, and sent them enter the battlefield as drones.

The drones built from the outstanding technology gathered all over the Republic could never achieve operationally active status.

However, how was it possible for the Albas, so superior to others, to build something inferior to the drones built by the inferior Empire?

***The Eighty Sixes are not humans, so what they will be piloting are not manned, but unmanned.***

The Republic Military Industry (RMI) created the automated unmanned fighter machine (drone), the “Juggernaut.”

It was deemed a humane weapon where human casualties were reduced to zero, and introduced into battle with rapturous praise from the citizens.

It was an unmanned machine installed with Eighty Six pilots as a processor, with a capacity **for persons to ride on.**

Year 367 of the Republic’s calendar.

Among this intense battlefield of zero KIA, the soldiers that were not counted as dead and treated as spare parts continued to sacrifice their lives on this day.

Lena saw that the red lights indicating the <Legion> were headed East towards their occupying area and retreating, and she relaxed a bit.

There were seven units lost in the third squadron, and a bitterness rose up her chest. The seven “Juggernauts” exploded with their processors within. There were no survivors.

The “Juggernaut,” a name chosen by its developers who hailed themselves as intellectuals; it was named after the foreign gods from ancient mythology.

The people who yearned to be saved gathered together, only to be crushed under the wheels of the chariot.

“...Handler One to Pleiades. Confirming all enemies have retreated.”

She heaved a sigh, and through the processor of the “Pleiades,” she spoke to the Eighty Six pilot who fought for himself and his family to regain citizenship.

Through the use of synchronized hearing to transmit or receive voices, the Para-RAID was a brand new communication system, more up to date as compared to past versions which were easily affected by distance, weather, landscape, and the EMP of the electronic jammer (Eintagsfliege).

In theory, this method could allow the senses to be synchronized, but only the hearing was synchronized in this case. The visual signals were too much for the user to handle. Hearing alone would be enough to transmit the bare minimum of information. Experience-wise, it was similar to a communicator or phone, and thus a low risk of confusion.

However, Lena assumed that was not simply all to that.

Without a synchronized visual, she would not have to witness. She would not have to witness the heinous looks of the enemy machines before her, the devastation of the allied machines close up being blown apart, and the colors of blood and organs being ripped from their bodies, oozing out.

“Surveillance will be carried out by the Fourth Squad. Third squad, please return.”

*“Pleiades here, understood... thanks for watching over the pigs with your*

*telescope there, Handler One."*

Upon hearing the reply from Pleiades that was dripping with sarcasm, she lowered her eyes.

She was an Alba, one of the hated who victimized others. At the same time, the fact remained that one of her duties as a Handler was to watch over the Eighty Sixes.

"Good work, Pleiades. Everyone in the team, and to the seven deceased... my honest sympathies."

"..."

There was a sharp, blade-like coldness in the silence. The Para-RAID only allowed synchronization of hearing, but as it was connected through various consciousness, the emotions of a conversation could be conveyed through this.

*"...Thank you for your usual kind words there, Handler One."*

Lena was left perturbed by the tone of cold condescension and malice, a stark contrast to the usual rage and hatred.

†

The following day, the news reported the usual, that the enemy took heavy losses, the Republic took minimal casualties, no one was dead, that the morals and progression of the Republic would prevail; one might even suspect if it was a repeated footage being replayed. There was a logo of a sword and a severed foot aired on this national channel. It was the Attribute of the revolutionary San Magnolia, its meaning being the toppling of the dominion and destruction of oppression.

*"...And also, considering that the war shall end in another two years, the government has decided to reduce the budget. First off, the 18th area on the Southern battlefield shall be abandoned, and all forces within shall be dismissed —"*

So the 18th area in the South has fallen. Lena sighed.

This was not an issue that could be settled via changing the account of the situation. Even after losing the lands, it was preposterous that they had no

intention of getting it back, and even planned to reduce the military budget.

The finances confiscated from the Eighty Sixes had already been depleted, the massive military spending resulted in the budgets for public duties and social benefits capped at a bottleneck. The government was unable to ignore the calls from the citizens to downsize the military.

Seated opposite Lena and dressed in an aged dress was her mother, opening her bright red lips as she spoke tenderly.

“...What is the matter, Lena? Enough with the long face and eat.”

The breakfast was laid out on the dining table, and of them, most of them were foodstuffs synthesized in the production plants.

The country had less than half its land left, and still contained at least eighty percent of the population, other than the Eighty Sixes; clearly there was no place to plant seed. With the <Legion> attacking and jamming, communications with other countries had become impossible, let alone trade, and **one might even be wondering if they remained**. Lena took a sip of the red tea that tasted different from her collection of hazy memories, and sliced the synthesized meat made of wheat protein that differed completely from real meat.

The compote accompanying the tea was the only real deal, made from the raspberries grown in the garden. This one item was a luxury, considering that the Republic at this point had no land for various trees, let alone a garden.

Her mother said with a smile,

“Lena, it is quite time for you retire and wed another family’s son.”

Lena quietly sighed. The news’s war reports remained the same every day, and so were her mother’s words.

Pedigree. Social status. Standing. Bloodline. Superior blood.

The glamorous mansion was built when the Millizes were still nobles. The silk dress she wore was befitting of the mansion, but would be dismissed as aged once she stepped outside it.

The blissful times seemed to have stopped there.

She seemed to have shut herself away from the outside world, locked in her

little, euphoric dream.

“The noble Princess of the Millizes must not be involved with this <Legion> or those ‘Eight Sixes.’ It is true your deceased father was a soldier, however, this is not the era of war.”

Not the era of war, or anything else; at this point, the country remained in war against the <Legion>. The citizens living so far away from the battlefield had yet to experience the war, the depictions only remained in film. They had long forgotten, whether it was reality or first-hand experience.

“Dear mother, it is our duty and honor as citizens of the Republic to protect our country. Also, they are not called Eighty Sixes. They are like us, undisputedly citizens of the Republic.”

The thin, delicate bridge of her mother’s face immediately showed a scowl.

“Filthy Colors, what citizens of the Republic? Goodness, the herds of livestock won’t work without bait, yet the government allowed them to set foot on the lands of the Republic.”

The Eighty Sixes joining the army would be given citizenship along with their families. Due to blatant, radicalized racism in all the eighty five areas, their residences were never revealed over the past nine years, ever since the war started. However, there were many who probably returned to their old homes and spent the rest of their days.

That was a reward as to be expected of their irrefutable contributions, but unfortunately, there were some amongst the beneficiaries who showed much reservation towards this. This person before Lena, sighing away as she shook her head, was one classic example.

“Ahh, filth. Absolute filth. Just to think, ten years ago, these creatures appearing just like humans were jumping about on the Liberté et Égalité, and now it’s happening again, ahh. For how long shall the freedom and equality of the Republic be trampled upon?”

“...It does seem that your words right now are trampling upon freedom and equality, dear mother.”

“Hm? What is wrong with you?”

Upon seeing the skeptical look on her mother, it was Lena's turn to sigh.

Truly, her mother did not understand.

It did not apply only to her mother. At this point, the citizens of the Republic continued to be proud of the country's Republic government, the five colored flag symbolizing freedom and equality, fraternity, justice, and purity. They were taught, through history textbooks, of the things past monarchies and dictatorships had committed, and would show hatred at the oppression, outrage at suppression, disdain at discrimination, and decry genocide as the act of the devil.

However, they could not understand that the same actions were repeating on the lands of this Republic. If Lena pointed this out, they would give looks of pity, asking,

*Are you unable to distinguish between humans and swines?*

Lena bit onto her faint pink lips.

Words were convenient, able to easily change the nature of things. Once a nameplate was dropped, humans would become swines.

Her mother frowned, looking slightly perturbed. However, she seemed to have understood something as she chuckled away.

"Your father certainly cared for those livestock, so we too should view them as equals, no?"

"...No, that."

Her father opposed the deportation of the Eighty Sixes until the very end, requesting for the law to be abandoned. Lena truly respected her father, but she could not bring herself to fully commit to his ideals.

Still, she remembered.

The burning flames. The silhouettes of the four legged spiders.

The crest of the Dullahan skeleton embedded upon the armor.

The hand reaching out to help. The bright red and black that shadowed her

ever since birth.

We are citizens of this Republic, born and raised in this country.

Her mother's unrestrained voice broke the silence.

"Still, Lena, the livestock will have their own rules as livestock. You cannot hope for those foolish and barbaric Eighty Sixes to understand the exalted ideals and virtues of humans. You simply have to lock them up and manage them."

Lena wordlessly finished her breakfast, wiped her mouth with a napkin, and stood up.

"I shall be leaving mother."

"You wish for me... to switch divisions?"

In the headmaster's office adorned with dulled gold and maroon wallpaper. The headmaster Carl-Stahl was seated upon an antique chair, and when his command was conveyed, Lena blinked her silver eyes in confusion.

In fact, many officers would be swapped around due to squad reassignment. The intense fighting on the frontline meant that squads would be worn down until they were unable to be maintained. Thus, it was commonplace for squads to be dissolved and regrouped. Lena never intended to reform her current squad, but many were completely obliterated.

Truly, the <Legion> was powerful.

The Geade Empire, being a military and technology powerhouse, lavished its vicious philosophy and advanced technology upon development, and in return, obtained devastating weaponry and stunningly agile drones. It amassed all of the superior Artificial Intelligence nobody else of its era had, which would never be fatigued, irate, or terrified as these were actual unmanned drones. No matter how many were destroyed, the fully automated factories located deep within the lands of the <Legion> would continue to churn out new machines, and send in new massive armies like swirling black clouds.

Unlike what the citizens knew, the <Juggernauts> were no match in

capabilities, and naturally, the amount of damage incurred would certainly not be minimal. In fact, a large number of casualties would be incurred from every sortie, and only continual replenishments could maintain the frontlines.

However, the squad Lena was in charge of did not incur many casualties.

Carl-Stahl's scarred face relaxed. He was tall and burly, with wide shoulders, the beard on his chin giving off a steady, commanding presence.

"Not to say that your squad will be reformed. In fact, the commander of another squad has retired, so there is an urgent need to select a commander to succeed him."

"So that squad is in charge of defending an important base?"

It seemed they could no longer wait for the superiors to decide on the successor.

"Right. Eastern Frontier, First Defense Forces of the First Battle Area, codenamed Spearhead squad. It's a selection of veterans chosen on the Eastern Front... in other words, the Elites."

Lena was increasingly perplexed, her adorable eyebrows curling into a frown.

The First Battle Zone was the defensive area most prone to taking the brunt of the <Legion> invasion. The First Defense Forces were the premier squad operating in that battlefield, bearing completely different responsibilities from the Second, Third, and Fourth Forces who were in charge of night surveillance and support, and only head out for battle when the First Forces couldn't sortie.

"A new Major like myself might not be up to such a task..."

Carl-Stahl gave a grimace.

"How can the youngest girl of the 91st Group, and the first to be promoted to Major, say such things? Being excessively humble will bring about disgust, Lena."

"My apologies, Uncle Jerome."

To Carl-Stahl, who referred to Lena by her first name, the latter humbly lowered her head. Carl-Stahl was a good friend of her deceased father, and the two were the rare few survivors from nine years ago, when the Republic's main

army was wiped out. When she was young, he often dropped by to play with her, and after her father died, he took extra care of Lena, from funding of the funeral to other various matters.

“To be honest... nobody is willing to be the Handler for Squad Spearhead.”

“Are they not the elites? Is it not utmost honor to command them as a soldier of the Republic?”

Not all Handlers would fulfill their responsibilities earnestly. Lena had heard rumors that some would remain in the control room, playing video games, that some would not bother to command in the control room, and that some would not provide their forces with intel, watching the units they were handling die one by one like a thriller, competing with their buddies to see which squad was eliminated faster. In fact, the ones who would actually command seriously were a rarity, but that was a different matter altogether.

“Hmm, the squad does contain the elites...”

Carl-Stahl spoke with a heavy tone.

“...The leader unit of Spearhead, Personal Codename <Undertaker>, has quite some history.”

Undertaker. Such a strange name.

“Those that know him call him the ‘God of Death,’ and stay away from him out of fear... rumor is that he broke his old Handler.”

“Eh?”

Lena could not help but exclaim. Typically, it was the other way around.

A Processor broke a Handler?

How?

“Some strange story?”

“I have no time to talk about such tales to my subordinate while on duty... but the truth of the matter is that strangely, many Handlers who took the squads Undertaker was in had either requested a change of squad or retirement. There was even one who immediately requested a change of forces after the first

operation, and another one who committed suicide, though the correlation is undetermined.”

“...Suicide, you say?”

“Truly unbelievable words... I heard that those retired still hear the ‘voices of the dead.’”

“...”

Certainly, it did seem to be some sort of phantom story.

Carl-Stahl noticed that Lena was silent, and thought of something, consoling her,

“You can tell me if you are unwilling, Lena. It is fine for you to remain at your current squad. I did say Spearhead contained veterans. It’s understood that it is impossible to synchronize with them all when they sortie, so the bare minimum surveillance will do. Command-wise, you can leave it to them...”

Lena pursed her lips.

“I will do this. To manage, command, and lead Squad Spearhead.”

It is a duty and privilege as a citizen of the Republic to protect the country. To be the leader of the Vanguard would be an utmost honor for her, not something she could allow or desire to refuse.

Carl-Stahl narrowed his eyes. Seriously, this child,

“Just the bare minimum will do. Nothing else more than that... and please refrain from communicating with the Processors under your charge.”

“A commander has an obligation to understand the subordinates. Communicating with them is a must, for as long as I am not refused.”

“Goodness, you...”

With a gentle grimace, he sighed. He took out a bundle of documents from his desk, and waved it before her.

“Again, I shall chime in a little. Do not record the number of casualties in the report. We have currently declared that there are no humans fighting on the frontlines, that anything recorded that is not supposed to exist will be ignored...

your form of protest will be heard by no one.”

“Even if you do say so, I cannot accept this quietly... and the laws to contain the Colorata have no basis to them anymore.”

The Geade Empire, which swept the continent through the powerful military might of the <Geade>, seemed to have been wiped out four years ago.

It was a rarity to tap the wireless signals controlled by the Empire due to constant jamming from the Eintagsfliege; four years ago, however, they suddenly vanished, and were never heard of again. One had to wonder if it was due to the <Legion> going rampant, or other reasons, but in any case, the Empire should have been obliterated.

The Concentration Camps of the Eighty Sixes were built on the premise that they were “descendants of the Empire,” and the basis and justification for them lost as a result.

However, the people were unwilling to let go of this entertainment called discrimination they had obtained. As they continued to trample and abuse, they were increasingly deluded in a sense of superiority, that they were victors. They chose the simple way to obtain delight, not to break, but to conceal the current scenario that they were sealed by the Empire and their drones, and the feeling of setback.

“Ignoring a fault is a bigger fault at that. This is already unforgivable to begin with...”

“Lena.”

The poised voice called for Lena, and she kept quiet.

“You may be a little too idealistic. Not only for others, but for yourself. Ideals are **too high and unable to be attained.**”

“...I see.”

Carl-Stahl’s silver eyes eased up, giving a bitter glint in the nostalgic gaze.

“You are really so similar to Vaclav... now then, Major Vladlena Millize, from this day forth, I hereby order you to be Handler of the First Defense Force in the First Battlefront. I hope you will work hard.”

“Thank you very much.”

“So you accepted? What got you interested, Lena?”

A change of squadron meant changes in many other things, and one of them was the Para-RAID settings, wherever the Para-RAID was to be connected.

The Head of the Para-RAID Development Team was Arnett, and she was also in charge of Lena’s settings changes and adjustments. Lena, who had taken a checkup on her advice, was changing into her military uniform.

She carefully hung the nonwoven fabric gown on the hanger, buttoning her blouse as she answered Arnett. Arnett was in the observation room, separated by a glass panel.

The Detached Palace from the Imperial Era was used as the Research building, and though it looked as regal as it was during the mid-Monarchy, the metal and glass sheets seen everywhere gave a cold, hard feeling. One of the glass walls depicted a mural of tropical fish and coral reefs.

“That’s simply an excuse made up by them. They won’t work hard, and made it up.”

Lena curled her lips into a smile as she latched her garter onto her stockings. She had been going through periodic checks related to the use of the Para-RAID; Arnett really was worrisome.

“It is true that someone actually committed suicide.”



Arnett, who was behind the glass wall and the holographic screen, modified the values of the settings, and took a sip of coffee from her mug... or whatever that thick, mudwater-like thing was... so she said,

“The ghost thing might be something some bored old men came up with, but it was said the dead man blew out his brains with a shotgun.”

Lena put on her skirt and blouse, rolled up her sleeves, and turned around. She reached her hands out for the silver hair draped over her shoulder, and combed it behind her.

“...Really?”

“They had me investigate if it was a malfunction in the Para-RAID. Leaving aside whether he was a commander, it’s not a good thing if news of suicide is leaked.”

“And then?”

Arnett simply shrugged, as a matter of fact.

“Who knows?”

“Who knows, huh...?”

“He’s dead. Where else am I supposed to investigate? The RAID device is normal, checks were done. If possible, bring the ‘Undertaker’ over? So I asked them to bring the Processor, but the idiots at the logistics branch just went ‘This flight has no room for swines~’”

She folded her arms angrily, leaning on the wall lazily, snorting away. So pretty and posh she was, yet her demeanor lacked in feminine charm.

“If they had brought him along, I would have investigated him thoroughly, even in the head. Goodness sake.”

Lena frowned at her unfiltered terms. She knew Arnett did not intend to say so, but she found it unbearable.

“...So, what about the processor?”

“Not from me, but those guys at the Military Police said so. I read their report, and it’s basically nothing. He just said he had no idea, and it ended. Who knows

what happened?”

Arnett curled her lips into a sarcastic sneer.

“He was told the Handler died, and so he answered, ‘Is that so?’ The tone was basically *so what?* Well whatever, he’s just a mere Eighty Six. Even if his superior died, there’s no other reaction to be expected.”

“...”

Lena went silent, and the sneer vanished from Arnett’s face.

“...Hey Lena, you should join the research team after all.”

“?”

Lena blinked in confusion, and saw Arnett raising her eyebrows like a cat. The silver-white eyes were showing unexpected sincerity.

“The army right now is just a detention center for the unemployed now. Our research team is still fine, but the other forces are just a bunch of idiots from the high numbered areas that can’t work to save their lives.”

At this point, the legislative zones of the Republic consisted of Area 1 at the center, and numbered starting from a centered square number. The greater the number, the worse off the living conditions, security, education levels, and the higher the unemployment rate.

“Two years later, when the <Legion> is gone, what do you intend to do? The tag of a ‘retired soldier’ on your shoulder isn’t going to help you find another job.”

Lena could only grimace.

All <Legion> drones would cease operation within two years.

That was a fact discovered from the capture of a few <Legion> drones. Their central processing units contained a fixed lifespan that could not be modified. Every new edition of the system could only last fifty thousand hours at most, or approximately six years. This was probably a failsafe in case the drones went rampant.

Since the Empire was confirmed to have been wiped out four years ago, the

central processing unit for the <Legion> drones should cease function completely within two years. In fact, based on frontline observations, the numbers of <Legion> had been declining, possibly due to the machines being worn out, unable to be enhanced.

“Thanks. But we’re still in a time of war.”

“Then you don’t have to go out and do so.”

Arnett did not back down. Once the data was configured, she switched off the screen with a wave of her hand, and leaned forward.

And then, she loathingly spat.

“Real or not, you are going to handle the troublesome Processors. Who knows how that will end up... and the Para-RAIDs might not be completely safe.”

Lena could not help but open her eyes.

“...Isn’t it completely proven that the Para-RAIDs are safe?”

Arnett seemed to have blurted it out accidentally. She gave a look of a child who was caught, and hushed her voice,

“Lena, do you not know this country? You cannot take what they say at face value.”

The Republic, so proud of its superior genetics, would not allow for any flaws in their technology. Even if there were, they would not admit it; this applied not only to the Para-RAIDs... but also the <Juggernaut>.

“In fact, I might say it’s kind of like a superpower, or something? We had such people investigated, and figured out that agitating this part of brain will cause a Para-RAID effect... the same as this thing.”

She pointed at the RAID device in her hand. The posh-looking silver ring was engraved with blue crystals. Several cables were connected from the crystals to the terminal, as the data being overwritten into the former.

“These ‘superhumans’ were siblings, synchronized with each other, so we simply wrote a modified parent-child genetic code into the RAID device of a Handler and the Processor units. As for why that could get them to synchronize,

we're still not sure."

"But... this was your father's research, right?"

"A collaborated research. The basis of the research, or the hypothesis, came from the collaborator. Father only prepared the research environment, and had the test subjects replicate the phenomenon."

"So, you can get the collaborator to work again, right?"

At that moment, Arnett's eyes became cold and dull.

"Impossible... he's an Eighty Sixer."

The Eighty Sixers, not deemed as human in any way, would not have their names recorded, simply allocated a number when they were assigned to Concentration Camps. As to which ones they were at, nobody knew.

"The RAID devices have safety features to prevent this from happening, but when the Para-RAIDs are activated by multiple people, the brain will overload, and at maximum synchronization, it will lead to mental breakdown. Also, there's the issue of too much activity that leads to one being 'lost'... you know about my father's mishap, don't you?"

"..."

Arnett's father, Professor Joseph Von Penrose, unfortunately went berserk in an experiment soon after he had published the thesis on the Para-RAIDs and completed the RAID device, and died as a result.

It was said the activation of the RAID device was accidentally set to the theoretical maximum value. Some deduced that he might have slipped into 'a certain place' deeper than the subconscious collection, and ended up in a subconscious collection of the world itself, viewing humanity as 'a whole' instead of 'individuals.'

"If used over a long time, who knows the effect it will have... one or two Eighty Sixers dead won't matter, but what will happen if something bad happens to you?"

Lena instinctively gave a displeased look. She knew Arnett was simply worried about her, but she could not help herself.

“Don’t do that... that’s sleazy of you.”

Arnett finally waved her hand impatiently.

“Okay okay. You’re a curious one.”

An awkward silence soon filled both sides of the glass wall.

Suddenly, Arnett gave a smile, as though to purge the silence.

“Speaking of curiosity, Lena, want some Chiffon cake? Something new I made from eggs.”

“Eh?”

Lena’s invisible cat ears seemed to have perked up, and Arnett stifled her giggle.

As a girl herself, Lena had an unconditional craving for sweets. This Chiffon cake had lots of egg white, an item that was a luxury amongst luxuries for the Republic lacking in land to raise poultry. Such enjoyment was only something the Princesses of the von Penroses, who were ex-nobility, had a massive mansion, and reared chickens could possess.

However,

“Erm... that isn’t the type of thing to have some cheese flavor even without cheese inside, giving off black smoke, erm well... looking like a frog... or something like that...?”

Just to note, that was the feedback of the one who ate the profiterole Arnett made.

The last line, to be precise, should be “Like a lumpy, strangled frog.” The appearance, and even the color was the same as a frog’s.

“Relax. This is the normal one. My matchmaking partner came over yesterday, and I tried it on him.”

However, he foamed at the mouth and passed out after eating the fifth one.

“At the very least.... even if you hate him, you could have shared your new creation with him.”

“Of course. I had it packed it really cute, with pink wrapper, a butterfly knot, a

kiss on a message card that read ‘To my beloved Theobalt,’ and had it posted to the apartment he’s staying at with his lover.”

“ ... ”

Lena was wondering if she should be feeling sorry for the man.

After an enjoyable time of some cake and tea with Arnett, the data transfer was completed. Lena returned home to her room, and had the RAID device placed on her neck.

The silver ring has delicate patterns the Albas loved, and resembled a posh choker. The bead-like crystals ornament contained some mock-neural crystals used for calculations; it dazzled under the light, and it was hard to imagine its true nature being a headset earphone and neck microphone.

She suddenly recalled what she had heard in the die.

The death god. Caused a suicide. Did not care about human deaths—Eighty Six.

What kind of person was he?

*Perhaps he hates us all?*

She shook her head, and took a little breath.

Right.

“—Activate.”

She activated the Para-RAID. It was a communication for the ages, unaffected by distance, weather, or landscape, able to be contacted at any given moment.

The connection was complete. No problems. There was noise ringing in this room, when it should not have been.

“Handler One here to all members of Squad Spearhead. First time meeting. Starting today, I shall be your handler.”

Following that was a troubled pause.

Lena felt agony.

Whenever she took over a new squad, everyone would show the same confused reaction upon hearing her voice.

The greeting between humans should be something ever so natural.

However, this awkward silence lingered only for a moment. A calm, extremely young voice echoed in the Para-RAID's hearing.

*"Nice to meet you, Handler One. This is the leader of Squad Spearhead. Personal codename <Undertaker>."*

The voice was different from what she expected. It was a precise, clear voice, one as relaxing as a lake surface deep within a forest. From his voice, it seemed he was of a similar age to Lena, very likely born to what was once a middle, upper class family.

*"We have been notified of a change in handler. Starting from now, please take care of us."*

Lena smiled as she heard the monotonous voice of what appeared to be a standoffish person.

Yes, if they continued to converse, she would understand that there was no way to misunderstand.

They were all humans.

Not some existence beneath humans called Eighty Sixers.

"Here too. Nice to be in your care, Undertaker."

Summarized  
Map of the  
Eastern Front  
(Republic of  
San Magnolia)

# MAP

Republic of San Magnolia First  
Legislative Zone.

Zones 2-85

Handler Control Room

The First zone is the center core, the capital to all 85 zones of the Republic, as wide as the area bordered by the Yamanote Line. The command point Lena works at is the control room in the military HQ located in the center core.

Republic 85 zones

23,000 square kilometres (a little smaller than Kanto area), surrounds the first legislative zone, densely populated.

Important fortress cluster (Grand Mur)

A fortress war used to protect all 85 zones of the Republic (strictly speaking, they are not walls, but appeared to be due to how close they are linked to)

~120km (estimated)

Anti-personnel, anti-tank minefield and automated intercepting cannons (First Field)

An unmanned intercepting system to prevent the invasion of the <Legion> and the 'Eighty Sixers' armed with weapons' from rebelling. Many similar fields were set up along the perimeters of every legislative zone.

Eastern Frontier army. First battle zone, First Defense Forces 'Spearhead' base.

Tens of hundreds of kilometres away from the Republic mainland, assigned to the frontmost base in the East, next to the area continued by the <Legion> Supplies were airdropped, and nobody could enter this area without permission.

<Legion> controlled  
territory



## Chapter 2 - Im Westen nichts Neues

**“129 days till Run Out Date!! Fucking Glory to Spearhead Squadron!!”**

On an inner wall of a black garage that had already faded in color due to weather, there was an old blackboard picked up by someone unknown, and those large words in colored chalk stated the countdown.

Shinn lifted his eyes from his clipboard, and spotted this one optimistic line on the board. In fact, they should have a hundred and nineteen days. When Kujo was assigned to this squadron, he would update that number every day.

Ten days ago, he died.

Shinn had stopped to look at the countdown, and lowered his head back to the maintenance records on the clipboard. The “Juggernaut” remained on standby in the hangar. He went towards his personal unit.

The bright red eyes of a Pyrope, and the short hair of the Onyx. He had inherited the noble bloodlines of both the Pyropes and the Onyx, and of who they called the Eighty Sixers, he had the most defining characteristics of the Colorata.

His handsome face was etched with poise and a calmness unbecoming of his age, somewhat aloof, and his slender body and white skin reflected his old identity as a member of the Empire’s nobility. The landscape of the Eastern frontier was mostly dominated by forests, grasslands, and wetlands, yet he was dressed in desert camouflage of dirt yellow and dark brown, for those were salvaged from the corpses in the deadstock of the Republic. The collar was messy, but he did not have to tidy himself, for no superior was there to supervise. The blue scarf was wrapped around his neck.

The sound of machinery churning echoed in the hangar, as maintenance continued on while the repair crew were growling at each other. At the courtyard before the hangar, there were a bunch of people playing some two vs

two basketball with strange rules. A leisurely guitar riff came from somewhere, an old anime song being played. Kino was lazing in his cockpit with its transparent hatch, reading a porno, and waved at Shinn once he spotted the latter approach.

It may have been the frontlines, but the members of this base had it free and easy on days without battle.

According to the report sent to the Handler, it should be the time for patrol in the Contest Area. This should have been a daily routine, but the squadron had deemed it to be pointless, and did not do so. Of those who wanted to go out and about, they went to the nearby towns to scavenge, while the others went down to work on the chores they were assigned (cooking, washing clothes, cleaning, planting vegetables, feeding the hens, and so on), or just killed time.

The military boots echoed crassly upon the floor, and following that was a bellow louder than a tank's, one that echoed through the hangar.

"Shinn! Shinei Nouzen! You made a mess again, you bastard!"

Like a cockroach, Kino scampered from the cockpit to the shadows, while Shinn merely stared at the shouter with a blank face.

"What?"

"What, you say, Undertaker!? You bastard—!"

Quickly storming towards Shinn was a man with the savage face of a watchdog, donning sunglasses plus a few strands of white hair amidst the grey, a mechanic who was approximately fifty, wearing oil-stained clothes.

The maintenance chief of Spearhead Squadron, Lev Audreht. The sixteen-year-old Shinn was considered a senior amongst the Processors, but Audreht was a survivor of the first batch of recruits nine years ago, an elder amongst the seniors.

"Why do you have to wreck the machine so much every time you sortie? The actuator and the dampener are rattling again. Its wheels aren't that stable, how many times have I told you to stop being reckless!?"

"I'm sorry."

“You think a simple apology will settle this!? I’m not making you apologise, I’m changing you for the better right here. One of these days, you’re going to die in some stupid battle! We’re already running out of spare parts, and until the next resupply, repairs are unlikely!”

“What about the second unit?”

“Yeaahhhh we have the second unit all thanks to that certain leader wrecking the units until we had only two spare units left! Maintaining your personal unit alone takes triple the amount of time it does for the other Processors. Who do you think you are, a Prince!?”

“The feudal system was abolished in the revolution three hundred years ago.”

“You sure are a shitty brat... given how you’re wearing them out and wrecking them, two or three units won’t be enough until the next resupply and sortie dates, you hear me!? What do you want me to do, pray for you not to wreck it? What next, hope the scrap metal won’t come haunting you over the next hundred years or something, huh!?”

“Fido probably had Kujo’s unit scavenged.”

Shinn said these words with his usual monotonous tone, and Audreht was momentarily silent.

“Yeah, we can get some spare parts from that Kujo’s unit... but I don’t want to do it. Seriously, don’t you think something is wrong about it? Putting on the unit of the dead onto your own?”

Shinn turned his head around slightly, and pointed at the armor of his personal “Juggernaut,” the “Undertaker.” There was a spray painted skeleton wielding a shovel beneath the canopy, one without a head.

Audreht could only grimace.

“No point nitpicking the details now... this is what you mean huh, Undertaker?”

The elderly mechanic nodded in thought, and turned to the ajar hangar shutters, at the endless plains of Spring.

The sky, so tall, so distant, was blue and cloudless, melting everything

beneath it. Under it, the lapis-colored Cornflower and the emerald young grass glittered, the scenery depicted endless as it became the grave of millions of Eighty-Sixers scattered all over the battlefield.

The Eighty-Sixers had no graves. They did not exist, and naturally, had no graves; even reclaiming their corpses was forbidden.

The pigs with the appearance of humans had no right to rest, and no freedom to be mourned over by their friends. That was the state of the world created by their own country nine years ago, and still maintained up to this point.

“That Kujo was blown to smithereens, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

Automated mines, faceless anti-personnel weapons with four limbs, their bodies filled with explosives; they were hideous, so resembling humans to an extent such that when viewed from a distance, they could be mistaken for casualties. Kujo went to assist another squadron in a night skirmish, and picked one up.

**“Now that’s just great. He’s there now, right?”**

“Probably.”

Personally, Shinn did not believe in the existence of Heaven or Hell, but he was willing to believe Kujo’s soul had left this place, and found its solace.

Audreht gave an intriguing look.

“That Kujo’s lucky to be in the same squadron as you when he died... these guys too.”

The ball entered the hoop, and the tattered net swayed as the court erupted in cheers. The anime song echoed in the company of the guitar riff, together with the random lyrics as delighted singing reverberated across the farms within the camp.

Audreht knew very well that the scenery before them was never to be seen in any of the other squadrons.

Continuous battles. Daily patrols against the ‘s raids. Extreme tension and fear would drain a person’s psyche, and across battles, friends would be lost. As

every day was critically arduous for them, they had no possible times for any daily human life, let alone relaxation or entertainment.

Yet this squadron could relax, and not worry about any enemy raids, despite being unable to avoid any raids.

“...These guys here are able to live peacefully because of you, Shinn.”

“The one with three times the armor maintenance of the other processors is me, right?”

Audreht was left speechless. Shinn could only shrug upon facing the displeased look beneath the sunglasses.

“Brat... just a little joke, and you took it for real.”

“I do feel bothered by this. Though I haven’t expressed this through actions.”

“Fool. Us mechanic’s job is to make sure you brats come back alive. One or two units isn’t much as long you guys come home. We’ve got to repair them no matter how tough it is.”

He rattled off this spiel of words, and turned aside bashfully.

“...Anyway, our Handler has changed again. What kind of person is it this time?”

Silence.

“...Yeah.”

“Yeah... say something...”

“That seems to be the case.”

Due to the frequent changes, Shinn had long forgotten their names. In fact, the Processors would never care about the existence of the Handlers.

For the Handlers had long abandoned their duties. Once there were one too many Eintagsflieges, the radar would be unable to transmit the data, and the HQ in the mainland far away would be able to command effectively. Thus, the Processors would never care about the Handlers, for their existences did not matter.

Thus, the duty of the Handler was merely relegated to supervising the

Processor, and that was the job's scope. The mission the Handler was left with, was to suppress the rebellious spirit of the Eighty-Sixers, using the Para-RAID that allowed them to monitor every action, and thoroughly dominate them.

Shinn recalled the infrequent conversations over the past week, and said,

"Got more writing work. Looks like I have to write a new patrol report every week."

"...They haven't been reading them, and the only audacious one sending the same carelessly written reports from five years ago is you."

To wit, he did not change the dates and location, and ever since then, they had never went on patrol, so everything included in the patrol was a sham. Shinn was dumbfounded that such reports remained undetected.

"Did you send a past document here on accident?" He recalled the calm, silver bell-like voice pointing out this issue, and sighed. "Never thought you would have a careless moment." She chuckled as she said, her laughter filled with pure kindness and sincerity.

"On the day she was appointed, we synchronized as she wanted to greet us, and she said we are to keep in contact in the future, so there'll be contact at least once a day. I guess it's a rare type among the Republic's army."

"Sounds like a kind one... well, she's going to suffer now. Poor one."

Shinn had the same thought, and did not answer.

In this world, justice or ideals were both powerless and pointless—

"...Yes."

And for some reason, Shinn turned towards the endless plains of Springs, as though someone had beckoned for him.

"Ba dum tss! Now this is really a 'Pig living outside the Grand Mur!'"

"Very funny, Haruto."

At the cookhouse of the army, Seo, who bravely volunteered to control the fire of the massive pot containing the berry jam, bluntly retorted at the

tomfoolery of the boy in his squadron. He was a Jade, with blond hair and green eyes, sixteen years old, a little short and scrawny.

The Rubies boy Haruto hanging the massive wild boar at the entrance of the courtyard opened his arms wide to emphasize his delight, and scratched his head.

He did not have any duties for the day, and went boar hunting in the nearby forest.

“Hmm, what’s with the lack of reaction? That was funny, right?”

“If I have to say, it’s a cold joke... but well.”

Seo dropped the sketch book he had in hand, and sized up the hunt before his eyes. It was probably dragged over by a “Juggernaut,” but it might have been difficult for one to hunt it, for it was a monstrously large boar.

“This is amazing. It’s big.”

“Isn’t it!? We’re having a barbeque tonight! Where’s Raiden? And Angel? I want to switch dinner duty with them.”

“Well, Shinn’s the one in charge today. Raiden went to ‘town’ to search for stuff, while Angel and the other girls are in charge of washing clothes today.”

Haruto stared at Seo.

“When was that decided?”

“Probably... after breakfast.”

“It’s almost noon.”

“Yep.”

“” ... ””

Even though they had to do the laundry for the entire camp, with six people washing, it would be impossible for them to not be done.

The washing point was by the riverside, and it’s a bright sunny Spring day.

Haruto broke into a leer.

“...So now they’re bathing. The river’s Heaven now, right!?”

“Before you go to Heaven for real, they do all have guns with them.”

Haruto froze up immediately. Seo sighed hard, took up the wooden scoop, and stirred the pot. Once he saw that the berry jam was almost done, he extinguished the fire.

He was about to close the lid when his Para-RAID activated.

When he was commissioned, Seo had a RAID device implanted into the back of his neck, and there was also an earring data tag for registration synchronization. The RAID device and the earring activated at the same time, creating a hallucinatory heat. He tapped at his earring with his fingertip, and switched to communication mode.

“Activate...”

Once the Para-RAID was synchronized, Seo’s green eyes became icy cold. Not far away was Haruto, the latter’s hand cupping his ear as the smile vanished from his face, with whom he exchanged looks with.

“Shinn... what now?”

The washing point was at the riverside. The river was wide, and lots of water body could be seen, the six female members of Spearhead were enjoying a water fight amidst the river flow.

“What are you doing, Kaie. Hurry over.”

Krena stopped in her tracks once she spotted her fidgeting squadmate, and called out to the latter. She had short Agate brown hair and the golden topaz eyes of a cat.

She had taken off her combat uniform and tied the sleeves on her waist, the olive drab tank top showing the curves of her body in the middle of the day, but none of her friends were bashful despite being dressed as such.

“No, well, thinking about it, it’s a little embarrassing...”

Kaie was a black haired girl with black eyes and white silky skin of ivory. Though her tone was similar to a boy’s, she was a girl. Her eyes were slightly red, probably mindful of the tank top sticking to the body. The ponytail as long

as a knight's helmet decoration draped upon her flat cleavage, giving off an alluring vibe.

“And is it really okay for us to be having a water fight... warrgh!!”

Angel, with her blueish-silver hair scattered on the back, scooped water with her hands and splashed it at Kaie. The former did not remove her uniform, but she had her zipper pulled to her belly, and for this posh lady, it was a daring getup for her. The silver hair proved her identity as an Adularia, but as she had inherited the light blue eyes of her great grandmother, a Celesta, she was deemed as an Eighty Six by the radicalized Republic, and banished to the borders.

“You're being so serious, Kaie. It's fine, our clothes are washed anyway.”

The other girls started to chime in,

“And Shinn will understand.”

“Ah yes. He also said it's hot today. Showed a rare smile even.”

“Well that's kind of understandable, even from that stone-faced leader.”

Saying that, they suddenly smiled at Krena.

“Th-That's not it! That's not what I meant!”

“What's so good about that guy who always seem to have something on his mind?”

“I said it's not!”

“Anyway, your thoughts, Kaie?”

“Shinn? Hmm, I personally don't think he's bad. Not much of a talker, stoic, but he's fine.”

“Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Wait a sec, Akie!?”

Krena suddenly panicked, and Kaie stifled her laugh. Krena really was easy to read.

“I see, I see. But since nobody's got him, I'm going to strike first. Let's show him an Eastern 'night raid' tonight, as quickly as possible...”

“K-Kaie!? E-Erm, I don’t have any thoughts about Shinn, but, I don’t think that’s good! You sh-should be more like a Yamato Nadeshiko, or something.”

Krena reacted flusteredly, and the girls smirked in unison.

“”””You’re so cute, Krena.””””

A moment later, and Krena realized she was had.

“Hey!”

“Yo, found you.”

The forest rustled, and their squadmate Daiya showed his face. He was a tall lanky one, with bright blond hair and emerald eyes befitting a Sapphire.

Just to note, he was a boy.

“”””KYYAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!””””

“WAHHH!!!!”

Daiya was assaulted by the supersonic weapons from all the women, who were probably equipped with such weapons since birth, along with all kinds of throwable items, and he hastily retreated behind the shrubs.

“Hey! Who threw a pistol!? It’s dangerous if it’s loaded!”

“”””KYYAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!””””

“WAHHH!!!!”

Daiya, struck directly during this second assault, finally went silent.

The girls hastily put on their clothes, and Angel approached.

“So, Daiya, what is it?”

“It’d be great if you could ask me ‘Are you alright?’ with a cute voice now, Angel.”

“Well are you fine Daiya?”

“Ah, my bad, please don’t say that with a blank face or I’ll cry...”

Kaie latched the velcro of her combat uniform, saw that the others had dressed up, and said,

“Yep, Daiya, you can come out now... what is it?”

“Ah yes. Actually, I have a part-time job as a messenger for today.”

It seemed someone had requested that he deliver a message. Krena used her arms to futilely cover her voluptuous body that could not be camouflaged by the combat uniform, pouting unhappily.

“You could have contacted us through the Para-RAID. Why come here?”

Daiya scratched his head.

“Well, won’t it be awkward to communicate with you girls through Para-RAID when you’re playing around, and that I’ll accidentally eavesdrop on your love stories? Most likely it’s about ‘Krena really likes Shinn~’ or something like that.”

“Wha...!”

Krena’s face went beetroot upon hearing him speak with a cutesy tone she would never use, and the female squadmates next to her started chatting away.

“Hmm. Peeping’s unforgivable, but this decision is the right one.”

“We personally don’t mind, but Krena definitely can’t take it.”

“And we were talking about this just now.”

“Oh yeah, if Shinn’s synchronized with us next time, have her say it out loud. Let’s see his reaction then.”

“Krena just said that Shinn was horrible, always the stone-faced death god, never changing his expressions, not cute at all.”

“I-I-I-I-I-I-I didn’t say that! Stop it already!!”

“”””You’re so cute, Krena.””””

“WAHHHH!! You idiots!!!”

Krena, who was teased by everyone present (including Daiya), cupped her head as she screamed.

Kaie was huffing her shoulders as she laughed, and asked,

“So, what is it about? Whatever you’re supposed to say.”

Upon hearing that, Daiya immediately erased all expression from his face.

“Ahh... it’s from that Shinn.”

And upon those words, the girls’ faces tensed up immediately.

Man does not live on bread alone.

Thousands of years ago, an ethereal savior once said so, and to this day it remained a classic adage. In a person’s life, there is always a need for additional things to enrich the mind and body, like snacks, coffee, music, games, and such. The white swines of the Republic who dumped them into this Hell never gave them anything other than the bare minimum, for they probably assumed there was no need to.

On the other hand, if Man wanted to live on, the primary issue would be to first fill the stomach.

“Alright Fido, we’ve got a problem here.”

It was a town reduced to rubble, and from time to time, they would search this town for some food that could be preserved for long, some vegetables growing in the gardens of some homes, pets that had become wild after escaping from captivity in the chaos of war, and abandoned entertainment.

They were at a plaza buried under the rubble. The Vice-Commander Raiden put down the synthesized food and the compressed bread, produced in the base’s factory and obtained from the emergency storeroom of a town hall raid shelter. His uniform was loose, showing his massive, tall body. He was a pure-blood Eisen, his dark metal short head and sharp face showing a robotic body.

The “Scavenger” was a drone that would tail the “Juggernaut” and resupply the latter with ammunition and energy packs. It was lanky, with four short legs, unappealing in appearance. At this point, one such “Scavenger” opposite him had its head lowered, sizing up the objects before it through the lens-shaped optical sensor.

“Which one is the trash?”

“Pi.”

Fido immediately reached out its mechanical arm and tossed the synthesized

food aside.

Raiden watched the white object roll afar, and picked up the bread left behind, chewing on it. Even a drone knew it was trash. The tongues of those white swines must have been infected given how they had just flatly deemed it as food.

All Concentration Camps and bases had production plants and automated factories for the necessities required for battle.

The power source and production control inputs came from the underground cables, coming from the other side of the Wall, and this was the automated food resupply system that was needlessly posh. However, the ones controlling this system were the white swines who had deemed them as pigs, and the produce were of the bare minimum quality, the thing called food that was synthesized out of it looking like plastic bombs, without exception, and the taste so unpleasant, one might become dumber.

Thus, one would have to search through the dumps abandoned nine years ago if real food was to be found. Luckily, this squadron had no need for patrol, and lots of time and energy packs could be conserved for the squadmates to search through towns while piloting the “Juggernaut.”

“So Fido, we’re looking for stuff other than that trash today. Get as much as you want, including other kinds of food.”

“Pi.”

Raiden, seated on the ground like a delinquent, stood up, and Fido followed him with creaking footsteps. One of their missions as “Scavengers” was to fill their cockpits with anything from the debris of the machines, including bullet casings. Raiden’s instructions however were a little weird.

To wit, the term “Scavenger” was just a moniker. If the supplies on hand were insufficient in battle, they would pick up usable items from destroyed “Juggernauts” or other “Scavengers.” Out of battle, they would wander the battlefield, and pick up items that could be used. Thus, the Processors simply called them “Scavengers.” They were reliable squadmates, alleviating the worries about insufficient ammunition or energy packs, vultures who greedily searched their dead.

Fido was a “Scavenger” who followed by Shinn’s side for five years.

It was said that it was picked up by Shinn after the latter’s squad encountered an enemy assault, and he ended up as the lone survivor, not completely destroyed, but its mobility lost.

It had the bare minimum learning capability, but a mere broken robot that was picked up would not have the intelligence for gratitude. Ever since then, Fido would always prioritize Shinn as the one to resupply, would follow him no matter the squad he was assigned to, and be by his side immediately whenever he sortied. Unlike the “Scavengers” who would not bother about feelings, it did showcase some semblance of loyalty. It was an old model that began service in the beginning of the war, and as it had been in service for long, it probably learned more things.

And to this drone that obediently followed its master, Shinn merely named it as “Fido.” A name appropriate for a dog. Like Pochi or Shiro... as expected, there was something wrong with that lad’s head.

“Pi.”

“Hm?”

Fido suddenly stopped behind Raiden, and the latter turned around.

He looked over at where the optical sensors were aiming, and saw the white bones that had long faded in color, huddled up at the bottom of a massive tree giving in the shadows of the rubble.

“...Ahh.”

So that was what he was being called for. Raiden approached the corpse. The uniform was completely tattered, the dismembered arms still grabbing the assault rifle until the very end. His neck had an identification tag latched to a chain, and he did not seem to be an Eighty-Sixer. Probably, he was one of the Republic’s Orthodox army who fought nine years ago, until the very end.

A tad later, *Pi*, Fido let out another electronic sound, asking if it could drag some things back. Outside of battle, it would prioritize picking up leftovers from the dead, probably a habit it had picked up from Shinn. It would never touch corpses, however, for the white swines had forbidden them from reclaiming

corpses.

After a pause, Raiden shook his head.

“No need... just leave him here.”

He recognized this tree before him. The Sakura. It was a tree that originated from the Far East of the continent, blooming with flowers when Spring started. This year, during the blooming season, per Kaie’s suggestion, every member of the squad visited this eyecatching tree to marvel the flowers. The pink petals merged into the night as the full moon illuminated it back then, making it beautiful.

The soldier remained on the carpet of petals, looking up at the radiant flowers; there was no reason to bury him and deny him the light of day.

This may have been one of the Albas, but he did experience battle, and was a warrior who gave his body for his country; he should not be deemed a white swine.

After a short moment of silence, he looked up, and felt a hallucinatory heat from his ear.

“—To all forces on a stroll. Do you hear me?”

“Seo? What is it?”

The clear voice could be heard within striking distance. As representative of all synchronized members in the dumps, Raiden responded.

“A sudden change in the weather report. A storm is coming.”

Raiden narrowed his eyes. To the East, in the skies above the areas controlled by , some faint silver could be seen spreading, the color so faint that he, who had exceptional vision, had to squint his eyes to pick out.

The Eintagsfliege of the <Legion? were the size of a butterfly, able to absorb and refract visible light and electromagnetic waves, jamming the signals across a battlefield. These drones would lead the way whenever a raid began, nullifying the enemy’s radar, and perfectly protecting their allies. They were the crux for whenever the launched their raids.

**“When?”**

***“I’m guessing in about two hours. It looks like other forces will be meeting up behind the ones closest to us. Resupply, more or less.”***

The closest forces were so far that eyes could not make them out, and the radar was already disabled. However, Seo... no, the one saying that could determine the actual situation as though it was in the palm of his hands.

“Understood. Returning immediately — Chise, Clotho. Meet at the entrance of Route 12.”

*“Understood.”*

“Looks like there’s no ‘Shepherd’ this time, just a head on fight. There might be changes in the enemy’s routes, but we’ll set up an ambush near Point 304 and clean them up in one fell swoop.”

Raiden gave commands to his scout team and returned to his personal unit not too far away; Seo’s voice was filled with an urge to smile as he said this in response. Raiden showed a savage smirk on his face.

“Just ‘Sheep’ huh? Good time to hunt.”

While the actual situation was more dire than they described, the tactics of the “Sheep” were simple without a “Shepherd” leading them, and a lot easier to deal with. Having knowledge of the enemy’s strength beforehand, they would feel more relieved than ever.

Goodness sake, this great ol’ death god. Raiden thought, and frowned.

What was the former thinking?

That red-eyed death god roaming the battlefield, seeking lost heads.

Raiden and the others returned to base, and saw eighteen other units on standby, ready to sortie. Seo’s unit was the one closest to the entrance, and he smiled like a mischievous cat.

“You’re slow, Raiden. Thought you stepped on a landmine.”

“Came back as fast as I could. Also, enough with the landmine jokes.”

“Ah. Sorry.”

Kujo was blown apart by an automated landmine. In the two months since this squadron was formed, he was the third KIA.

The thinning rate of the processors was extremely high. Every year, hundreds of thousands were conscripted, and a year later, less than a thousand remained. Although, this was a great improvement as compared to their forefathers, who could only tussle up close. Back then, the only way to fight was to charge into the camp with rockets or bombs in hands, such that the casualty rate each day would be at least fifty percent.

In contrast, while the KIA rate of this squad was strangely low, the fact remained that this was the frontline.

There was no battlefield without losses incurred.

The arrival of Death would always be sudden, and fair.

“Everyone here? Listen up.”

Everyone straightened up once they heard the quiet voice that traveled far.

The map of the First Battle Zone was clouded with a transparent cover containing the necessary information for the operation. Shinn was already before them, as though moonlight shone down upon him.

His white face was accompanied by a familiar desert camouflage uniform, and the emblem of Captain indicating his identity as leader; the blue scarf continued to flutter around his neck, and that was one of the sources of his ominous nickname.

The head of this death god was long gone, but remained hidden under the scarf, or something like that.

“I shall explain the situation.”

This squad leader, nicknamed the “Death God,” spotted the grim looks of his squadmates in his cold red eyes.

The briefing over the enemy numbers, progression routes and planned countermeasures was extremely simple, yet clear. All of the processors boarded the “Juggernauts.” Each of them, face or physique-wise, were youthful soldiers,

in their mid-to-late teens.

Once the last part was sealed within the hatch, the twenty one armored units awoke from their slumber.

The M1A4 “Juggernaut,” a multi-pedaled armored weapon unmanned drone that had men within.

Its four limbs were thin and long, supporting the little pupa-shaped body of light brown armor, like aged bones. The unit had two heavy machine guns as subarms, a pair of wire anchors, and a 57mm mounted cannon on the back.

From afar, the machine resembled a wandering spider, and the combat weapons swinging at the front, along with the main cannon on the back, resembled the claws and tail of a scorpion. This was the burial place of their Eighty Sixer compatriots.

The ambush was to be set up in an abandoned city. Shinn was hidden in a corner of a collapsed Church, camped in the cramped cockpit of the “Juggernaut,” and opened his eyes that had been closed.

The area of this kill zone was a main street, and they had divided into various teams, scattered along the corners of the street to assure that firing range would not overlap. The vanguard team comprising of Number One and Number Three (Shinn and Seo) had acted independently from the Covering Team comprising of Number Two and Number Four (Raiden and Kaie), flanking the street. The grenadier team led by Number Five (Daiya) and the sniper team led by Number Six (Krena) were hidden at the other side of the street, waiting in place.

Shinn callously stared at the holographic screen of little visibility, detected the enemy numbers and formations, and narrowed his eyes.

The cockpit of the “Juggernaut” was similar to a fighter jet, with various switches lined on both a left and right joystick, and an LCD display showing various instruments. Unlike the anti-wind hatch of the fighter jet however, the cockpit of the “Juggernaut” was completely covered, and it was impossible to see the outside. Instead, there was a three dimensional optical screen and a holographic window for showing messages, providing the pilot with intel but not alleviating the darkness and confined spaces at all. One could say it was a

coffin.

The enemy's formation was as expected, scattered in the shape of wheat—the scouting team leading the vanguard, and four teams at the tip of the wheat. Such was the classic offensive formation of the armor squad, textbook-like, in fact. Numbers and capabilities-wise, they were always superior, and it would not use any unpredictable formations. Thus, they could be easily identified.

No matter the prediction, the enemy would send in a large fighting force to win with numbers. Such was the tactic that had never changed.

In the face of this, the nickname well deserved, it would be hard to beat it even with double the manpower, and a typical army would have chosen to retreat due to despair and helplessness. However, the fighting style of the “Juggernauts,” the Eighty Sixers, had always been to fight many, the overwhelmingly many, with few.

Suddenly, Shinn recalled a line from long before, when someone recited a line from the Bible.

Someone.

He could no longer that person's face and voice.

All he could remember was the final scene, and the voice.

And that line.

—et interrogabat eum.

Raiden heard Shinn mutter something through the Para-RAID, as though it was some noise, and put his leg down, sitting upright. He was hidden under the rubble, his main screen buried under the grey concrete, the radar in passive mode.

Shinn was not speaking in their mother tongue, the Republic's language, and he could not understand. All he could hear was *dicit ei legio nomen mihi*. Seo snapped in annoyance,

*“Shinn, were you reading the Bible just now? That's poor taste from you. Especially when you're using that line right now!”*

“What did he just say?”

*“When the Messiah asked if they were demons or dead spirits, they answered, ‘Legion,’ for we are many.”*

Raiden went silent. Of course, it was horrible.

Suddenly, there was another person synchronized in the Para-RAID.

*“Handler One to all units. My apologies for being late.”*

The delightful silver bell voice entered their ears through the Para-RAID. It appeared this new Handler was assigned here after the previous one was terrified by this “death god” and resigned as a result. From her voice, it appeared she was of similar age to them.

*“Enemy approaching. Please intercept at Point 208.”*

*“Undertaker to Handler One. Confirming. Deployment at Point 304 complete.”*

Shinn flatly answered. There seemed to be a gasp from the other end of the Para-RAID.

*“How fast... impressive on your part, Undertaker.”*

The Handler marveled with sincerity. *Of course*, Raiden muttered in his heart. Shinn and the other squadmates had personal codenames, indicating that they were veterans.

Most processors would use call signs based on their squad names and numbers. Those who were not named as such were veterans, who survived a year of battlefields when the survival rate was less than a single percent. They were blessed with talents and elements those killed never had; they were demons, death gods, taking the form of monsters.

All the processors in Spearhead had their unique “call signs,” and they were veterans with four, five years of combat experience. They were not handicapped in any way, even with the Princess hiding behind the city’s walls.

But at the same time, he was quietly impressed.

Given the knowledge that they would be attacking, Point 208 would be deduced as the optimal point to counter. It had been a week since she had

taken duty, but it seemed she was not simply a kind one.

A siren.

The sensors by the feet resonated. The holographic window popped out before him, and zoomed in.

Before them, there was the debris of a building down the main street they were flanking, and there appeared a black spot at the other end as the sun shone down; following that, the horizon was covered in metal.

They have arrived.

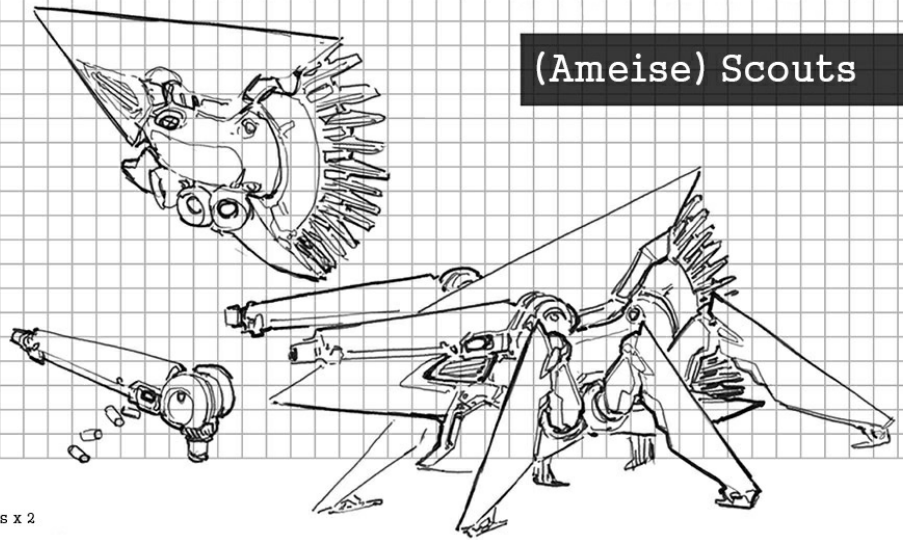
# THE BASIC DRONES

Basic <Legion> Forces.

Name derived from 'ant'. The most numerous of the <Legion>. As the name implied, it would act as the scouts, and provide introductions to shoot for the tanks (Löwe) and the long distance cannon snipers (Scorpion) shooting from the back, proceeding to eliminate enemy footsoldiers.

## [ A R M A M E N T ]

High powered sensor unit x 1 / 7.62mm anti personnel guns x 2

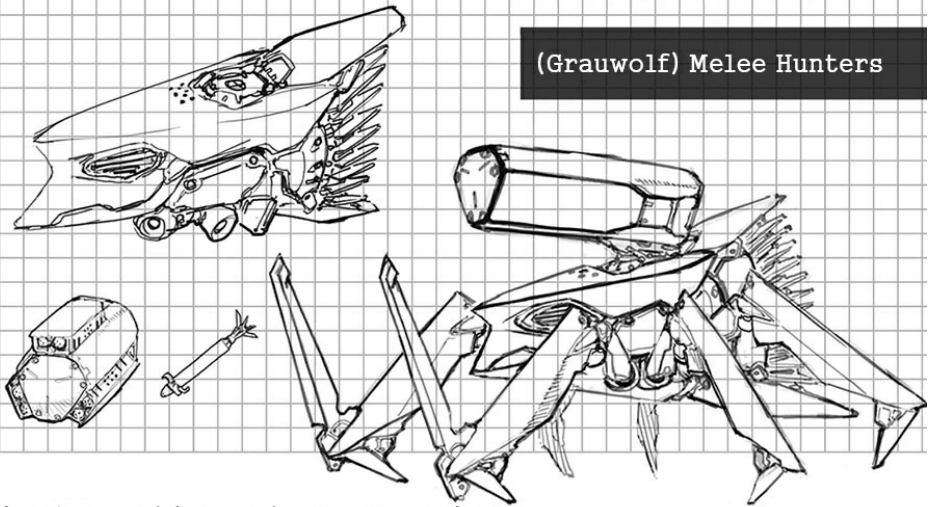


(Ameise) Scouts

Name derived from 'wolf'. Major characteristic are the close-ranged blades on the front legs, moves agilely, and rips the enemy's armor apart like a carnivore. Also carries a rocket launcher with unspeakable destructiveness on the back. The armor's not thick, so as to maintain mobility.

## [ A R M A M E N T ]

Front legs: anti-armor high frequency blade x 2 / back: 76mm multi-barrel anti-tank rocket launcher x 1

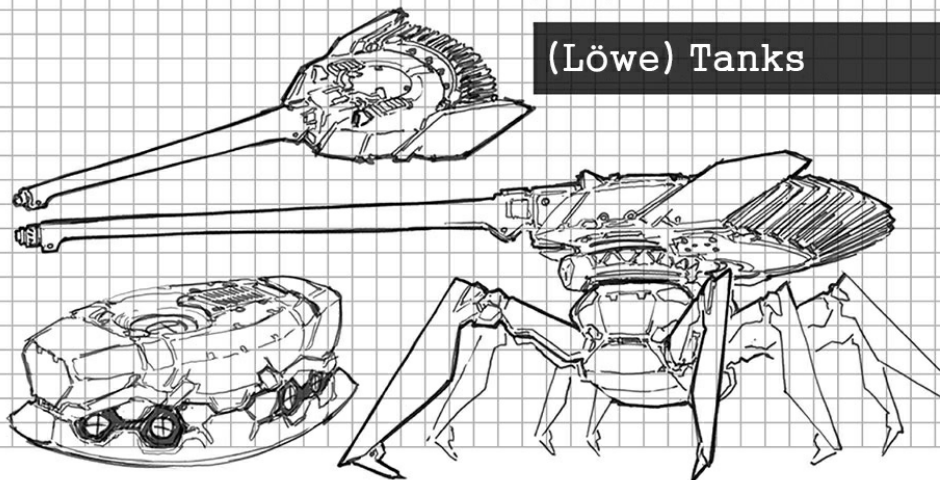


(Grauwolf) Melee Hunters

Name derived from 'lion'. For that reason, it possess tremendous firepower. The 120mm cannon on the top (with at least twice the power of the "Juggernaut" main cannon) will crush everything in its path. Due to the thick armor and the massive frame, one surefire tactic was to lure it into the forest, where there are many obstacles.

## [ A R M A M E N T ]

Top: 120mm smoothbore cannon x 1



(Löwe) Tanks

The radar screen was immediately filled with blips of enemy units.

The monster army of robots swarmed the grey dumps, like a shadow eating into the light, looming towards them.

The units were lined accordingly, each team fifty to a hundred meters between them. Even the lightest of them, the scouts (Ameise) were more than ten tonnes in weight, yet when they advanced, they would let out a soft rattling of the bones, and no footsteps to be heard. Only the rustling of the leaves ... as they spread before them.

Such was a surreal yet regal sight.

Three pairs of legs advanced at the front, shuffling their legs, the complex sensor unit beneath their abdomens and the 7.62mm anti-personnel guns on the shoulders shook before them. Such were the Ameise who were like piranhas.

There was also the close range hunting type (Grauwolf), a terrifying unit resembling a six legged shark, with 76mm anti-tank rocket launchers on the back, and high frequency blades on the front pair of legs reflecting a dull light.

They were accompanied by fifty ton tanks (Löwe) with eight legs barely supporting the weight, bearing a terrifyingly overwhelming 120mm smoothbore cannon as it marched on with uppity.

The massive flock of Eintagsfliege drones scattered in the skies above blocked off the sun, casting shadows onto the ground. The nanomachines forming the blood and neural system of the created husks due to metabolism, fluttering in the air like silver powder or white snow.

The Ameise scouts entered the kill zone. It passed by the first team in ambush, leading the rest forward, until the final Löwe had entered—

All of them entered.

*“Fire.”*

Shinn ordered. At the same time, all units on standby squeezed the trigger in unison.

The first shot came from the fourth team, aiming at the vanguard, and at the

same time, team one fired cannons from the back. The weak Ameise and the Löwe with thin armor at the back were shot down, disabled as a result, and before the rest of the could ready themselves, the other combat units unleashed cannons through them.

Explosions. Booms. The shattered metal chips and the silver blood of the the nanomachines splattered along with the black flames.

At the same time, the twenty one “Juggernauts” turned immediately.

Some of them continued to fire while leaving their cover, while some quickly dispersed while using obstacles as cover, moving to the back or sides of their squadmates firing at the , and then fired away. Those that fired initially left their cover and began to flank the enemy.

The “Juggernaut” was a failure as a machine.

Thin aluminium alloy could not stand up to the barrage of a heavy machine gun. Though its mobility was far superior to a caterpillar tank, the cannon’s firepower was pitifully little compared to the Löwe.

The delicate four limbs could only withstand lighter weight, probably because the programming time for movement was too short (the more legs there were, the more complex the programming required), the pressure on the legs remained massive, and the legs would easily lose footing at the softer terrain of the swamps along the Eastern frontier. Combat robots in movies and anime were often depicted to run and jump with much speed, even in air, but those were an unattainable dream for this machine. One might even laugh in ridicule, for it was a moveable coffin.

The “Juggernaut,” so vulnerable to one hit, could barely muster a fight against the weakly armed Ameise, and was unable to fight a Grauwolf or a Löwe head on. Typically, they could only coordinate with multiple units and use the landscape and obstacles to make up for the deficiency in mobility, duck to the flank or back where the weaker armor was, and attack. Such was the tactic that had passed on for seven years, derived from the Eighty Sixers predecessors who had made terrible sacrifices, developed these techniques, inherited them, and passed them on to others.

The processors of Squad Spearhead relied on this to survive years on the

battlefield, and were more familiar with this than anyone else. Chemistry was developed in the squad, such that they could understand each other, and fluidly fight on without the need for additional instructions and contact.

And,

Before he knew it, his lips showed a sneer.

We have the protection of the “death god” here.

The “Juggernaut” bearing the spray painted headless skeleton, the “Undertaker,” quickly darted through the collapsed buildings and the shadows beneath the rubble.

The enemy’s shots could not hit him, and he never missed. He could rely on skillful routes to attack the blind spots of the enemy, or lead them into his squadmates kill zone’ to be eliminated, whether they were Ameise, Grauwolf, or Löwe.

Shinn’s mission was to deliberately charge into enemy ranks alone and break up their coordination, slicing his way through. He focused on close ranged combat against the Point Man of the enemy which was the style he was best at.

The red signals indicating the enemy attackers did not vanish, as his bloody red eyes were no longer watching the radar filled with them. Like a real death god, he affirmed the order of enemy machines to be destroyed with his cold eyes. Suddenly, he was rattled by a little lament.

Again, he would not show up, huh?

This meaningless thought remained in his mind for just a moment, before it was scattered along with the massive explosion as he immediately squeezed the trigger. His eyes and thoughts were quickly diverted to the next one, and while firing away, he gave the most efficient killing instructions to his squadmates’ machines.

“—Team Three. Lure the enemy before you and retreat south west. Team five, hold your position, and wait for all the enemies to enter the kill zone before firing.”

*“Daiya (Black Dog) here, understood... Angel (Snow White), use this time to reload.”*

*“Seo (Laughing Fox) too. Don’t shoot at us, Black Dog!”*

“Haruto (Falke). Bearing 270, distance 400. It’s coming out from the building. Once it shows up, open fire.”

*“Understood. Kino (Fafnir), lend me a hand.”*

A chain of rumbling cannon shots could be heard from afar, and the rubble atop the dumps shook.

The Grauwolfs scaled the wall perpendicular to the floor with unexpected mobility, aiming to attack from above, only to be torn apart by gunfire the moment they leaped off, exploding in the air.

Shinn scanned his eyes for the next target, and spotted strange movements from the enemy before quickly averting his eyes.

*“Everyone cease fire and scatter.”*

Everyone immediately responded to the sudden commands, and nobody asked, Why do such a stupid thing? As long as the frontlines were struggling, they would send in reinforcements. There was still an enemy unit that had yet to show up.

*llllllllllllllllllllnn*, there was a shrill buzzing.

The bombardment came from afar and landed upon every corner, resulting in sudden explosions, and the black scorched earth burst like bubbles, blasted into the air.

It was the covering fire from the 155mm automated cannons, the long ranged type bombardiers “Scorpion.”

With the computer assisting to calculate the trajectory, it was deduced that the cannon was shot approximately 30km to the North-East. However, this information was pointless, for they had no weapon that could attack over such a long distance. What they could do was to scan the landscape and distribution of the enemy spotters that would be imperative for long distance sniping—

*“Handler One to all units. Sending possible locations of spotters now, three of*

*them. Please identify and suppress."*

Shinn raised an eyebrow. There were three lights flickering on the digital map, compared it with the enemy distribution he had figured out, and gave the instruction to the marksman Krena hidden amongst the buildings at the back.

"Krena (Gunslinger). Bearing 030, distance 1200, four units on rooftop."

*"Understood. Leave it to me."*

"Handler One, transmission of data through laser may reveal our locations. Please relay only through voice during operation."

*"...! My apologies."*

"Next wave of spotters are coming. Please continue to deduce and reveal enemy position.

Pa, he seemed to sense a beaming smile from the other end of the Para-RAID.

*"Yes!"*

Upon hearing the heartfelt answer from the Handler girl, Shinn frowned—and his consciousness was again dragged to the battlefield with sudden flashes and alerts.

The cannons bombarded the battlefield like a storm, showing no concern for allied machines. Such barbaric tactics could be used, for they were all drones. Raiden heard the deafening explosions, and continued to seek the next prey.

Looking across at the trail of bullets, he could see that the enemy was still superior in numbers. One hit from a heavy machine gun would be critical damage, and a blast from a tank cannon would naturally blow him into smithereens.

He darted through cover and entered the shadow of the ruins, only to find a guest there. It was the "Undertaker." He seemed to have depleted his bullets, and was getting resupply from the "Scavenger," Fido, as usual.

"Quite a lot of them."

"Isn't it like hunting? Just enjoy this."

He definitely overheard the conversation with Seo, for he gave a sarcastic retort.

“...We got a lot more Löwe than expected. Looks like reinforcements resupplied them.”

He noted with a blase tone, as though a reminder to bring an umbrella during a drizzle. Rather, Raiden had never seen Shinn falter at all. The latter would probably remain as such when he dies, or even after he dies.

“There’s a limit to the cover we have. Our movements are going to be detected at this rate. Better wipe them out before that happens.”

Fido’s crane arms swapped out the ammunition container, and reloading was done. “Undertaker” stood up.

“I’ll handle the Löwes. I’m Leaving the other enemies and command for covering fire to you.”

“Understood, Undertaker... you’re going to be blasted by that old man Audreht again.”

“Undertaker” seemed to have chuckled. It burst out of the rubble.

With the maximum speed possible, the “Juggernaut” darted from one spot of cover to another, and quickly approached the four enemy Löwe. Such was an action that could not simply be dismissed as suicidal, let alone reckless, and the Handler Girl shrieked,

*“Undertaker! What are you...!?”*

A Löwe adjusted its cannon, and opened fire. The “Undertaker” twitched to the side, evading the shot. Another cannon fired over, and he dodged it.

Fire, fire, fire, fire; both humans and drones would be obliterated to dust by the continuous 120mm cannons, yet the “Undertaker” managed to dodge them all and avoid forward. He did not adjust his path upon see the cannons, but through experience and instincts, and a nightmarish piloting skills, like a headless white skeleton crawling about.

The four Löwe seemed peeved as they turned around, glaring at the ground with heinous looks, and charged head on with explosive pace.

The steel bodies were as heavy as ever, yet they could accelerate to maximum speed silently from standing position, and charged towards the “Undertaker.” The enemies’ mobility was so unfair, boosted by powerful shock absorbers and a highly potent linear actuator.

The eight legs bent slightly, and one unit jumped up abruptly, intending to crush him. At this point—

The “Undertaker” jumped immediately.

It evaded the attack from the Löwe by leaping to the side, spun in the air, landed, and jumped again. He got onto the leg of the Löwe, trampled upon the joints, climbed up, quickly arrived atop the cannon, spread the front legs apart, leaned forward, and thrust the main cannon mounted on his subarm against the enemy’s steel armor.

Visibly, that was where the armor was thinnest, atop the back of the cannon.

Fire.

The fuse for the minimum range was killed off, and the high speed piercing grenade slotted through the steel plates, as the highly potent explosive that could trigger a detonation velocity of 8000 meters per second burst into the unit.

The “Undertaker” was already eyeing a second Löwe by the time it hopped off the first one that was sputtering black smoke. He dodged the clustered array of bullets with much agility, and at its legs, swung the high frequency blades, a close ranged combat weapon that nobody other than Shinn had equipped, for it had tremendous power yet limited range.

Once the second unit lost its balance and tripped over, he got onto its back, and fired to expunge it, using it to block the cannon from the third unit. While the Löwe’s weak sensors were distracted by the flames of the explosion, he fired a Wire Anchor, grappled onto the nearby frame of a tall building, and leapt onto the third unit that was moving its cannon in a frenzy after having lost its target, and fired upon it.

“!”

He could sense the speechlessness from the Handler on the other side of the

Para-RAID.

If the developer of this aluminium alloy coffin was to see this sequence of actions, he might collapse or begin frothing in fear. Raiden narrowed his eyes as he watched Shinn battle.

The “Juggernaut” was not meant for such a manner of battle. It was simply a suicidal weapon that would be taken down in one shot, lacking in firepower, armor, and mobility, only good if it could shoot. To beat just one Löwe, let alone many in this unit would be unthinkable.

Naturally, the price of this was huge.

The legs of the “Juggernaut” were fragile, and with the excessive burden, they would be utterly ruptured after the battle ended, so much that it would easily become a target for the other units aiming to protect the main forces, the Löwe. Due to his efforts though, Raiden and the others could take down the other enemy types without worry for the Löwe, and the outcome was already decided. In fact, Raiden was curious as to how Shinn managed to live on. Not only did the latter not die, but for five years, this monster continued to survive through such methods.

It’s a pity, Raiden always thought.

For three years they had fought together. For three years Raiden was Shinn’s Vice Commander, his deputy. Both of them had “Personal Codenames,” but Raiden could never mimic Shinn’s movements. He could never surpass Shinn. That headless death god was really a prodigy at battle. Not only was he protected by luck, but if he had ample time and equipment, Shinn might become the crucial core of obliterating the entire by himself, and he had the potential to be a hero of any era.

However, Shinn just happened to be born at the wrong time. If he could have appeared earlier, like in the era of the Knights from years back, he would have been a renowned warrior, and if he was in the final war of humanity, he would have been a hero with his name recorded in the war annals.

It was a stupid battlefield, and he had no hope for that.

He had no human dignity or rights, no grave after he dies, and no

accomplishments left behind. He would be simply used as a single-use weapon, and be abandoned upon death, lying in an unknown corner of the battlefield; such was his fate. Like the millions of comrades and allies on this battlefield, they would leave nothing other than rotten bones.

The clouds formed by the Eintagsfliege drones started to disperse, and the clear sun returned to the land, while the remaining retreated under the cover of the Scorpions. The cold drones would never harbor vengeance for the sacrifices of their comrades, for once they deemed that the losses exceeded a quota, they would determine that the objective would never be achieved, and immediately retreat.

The setting sun shone upon the “Undertaker,” now amidst the remains of the Löwe, and displayed its silhouette.

That light was like a moonlight shining upon the blade of an ancient sword, so breathtakingly beautiful.

As long as there were no night battles or raids by the enemy, the few hours between cleanup after dinner and lights out was free for them.

Angel cleaned up the kitchen, brewed coffee for everyone, and returned to find everyone in the base gathered at the courtyard before the hangar.

“Alright, one shot on Master Bear, and two on Rabbit Knight. Seven points for Haruto!”

“Argh, missed two there. I really am poor at using the handgun~”

“Oho, Fido suddenly poses a challenge! Put the cans sideways! How would Kino, coming next up, fare this time!?”

“You serious... ahhh! I can’t do it at all! Next! Who’s next, hurry up!”

“It’s me. Eh... Kaie Tanya, challenging now!”

“Okay, two points.”

“Woah, all five shots hit. As to be expected of you, Raiden.”

“Hmph, too easy.”

“Huh, don’t get cocky. Get out there, Krena! Show them your real godlike skills!”

“Okay, leave it to me! Fido, don’t set it up, just toss it!”

“““Woaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!!!”””

“...Goodness, you’re making it difficult today, Fido. This tower shape is harder than before.”

“Shinn, your turn.”

“Nn.”

“.....Woaaaaaaaahhhh, you cleared them all. As annoying as always...”

There were lots of empty cans after dinner, and everyone took out their handguns for some shooting game. Seo drew a few cute animal illustrations on the cans to denote points, while Fido picked up the empty cans that were shot down while everyone else was shooting, arranging them in towers or pyramids.

Angel smiled as she watched this bustling mood.

Dinner was considered scrumptious. They tore the boar meat and roasted it over the fire, and added lots of sauce made from currants, accompanied with vegetables harvested from the fields, canned milk, and mushroom cream soup. It’s not fun to eat in the canteen, so everyone yapped, so they moved the tables out; those on cooking duty had too much on their plates, resulting in everyone preparing.

It was enjoyable. She felt utter delight in her heart while being with everyone.

Shinn did not look at the cans he shot down, and started flipping through the pages of a book at a corner a little distance away from the ruckus; Angel placed the mug of coffee before him.

“Good work.”

Shinn merely lifted his eyes towards her as response. Angel handed the tray of coffee mugs to Daiya, took a chair opposite Shinn, and sat down.

He continued to read through the thick book, his eyes focused on it. A black cat with white claws, which the squadron had adopted, was fighting a rough

battle against the pages. She smiled,

“Is it interesting?”

“Not really.”

Shinn said, and probably felt his answer was too frivolous, so he continued on,

“When I think about other matters, I won’t really pay much attention to that.”

“...I see.”

Angel said as she gave a faint grimace. That alone was something neither she nor her squadmates could share the burden of.

“Thank for for everything.”

Suddenly, the RAID device heated up.

*“To everyone in the squadron. Is it convenient now?”*

The Handler Girl’s voice rang. It had been a week since she assumed duties, and every day, she would interact with everyone at this time, after dinner, not skipping a single day.

“No problems here, Handler One. Good work again for today.”

Shinn answered in everyone’s stead. His eyes remained on the book, but the cat would not let him flip the pages, so he raised the book up.

The squadmates who were enjoying their game hurriedly ejected the bullets from their handgun, and holstered them. The government had forbidden all Eighty Sixers from wielding small arms in case a rebellion occurred. However, as nobody had been checking on them, they had taken them from an abandoned military facility nearby.

*“Yeah, good work from you and your squad too, Undertaker... is everyone playing a game? I do apologize if I am disturbing you, so please continue.”*

“Just wasting some time. Please do not mind.”

You may switch off the Para-RAID if you do not wish to talk, the girl had said the first day they synchronized, so they switched it off and started a knife throwing contest. To these squadmates of his, Shinn answered as he watched

them. Raiden, Seo, Kaie, and a few probably decided to settle down for some coffee, as they dragged chairs to sit, or sat on the table.

*“Really? You do seem to be enjoying yourself... in any case.”*

It seemed their Handler had finally decided to get to the main point. Shinn could practically see the serious eyes directed right at him.

*“Undertaker. I do have a few words for you today.”*

It sounded like a gentle reminder from a student councilor to an elite student, rather than a superior’s reproaching, and Shinn took a sip of coffee, not minding in the slightest. He did not intend to listen to the Handler who was hiding within the city’s walls.

“What is it about?”

*“It is about the patrol and battle reports. They do not seem to have been sent mistakenly... I found all of them to be the same.”*

Shinn raised his eyebrows.

“You read them all?”

*“Only the parts after you were assigned to Spearhead.”*

“...You’re still doing that again?”

Raiden looked absolutely dumbfounded, but Shinn ignored him.

“What is the point for you to know about the frontlines? It is a waste of time.”

*“It is one of our duties as Handlers to analyze the tactics and formations.”*

Upon saying that, the Handler eased her tone slightly,

*“I do understand that you did not send any as we have not been reading them. It is our fault, and I will not reprimand you on that, but from now on, please write them to me. I will read them.”*

What a bother.

Shinn thought, and spoke up.

“I’m bad at writing.”

“You’re so stubborn.”

Daiya muttered, and Shinn ignored him as he flipped a page of the thick philosophy book in his hands.

Of course, the Handler would not know what he was doing as she was not present. She probably had assumed that a processor detained in a Concentration Camp since childhood might not have undergone basic education, and awkwardly said,

*“Ah... my apologies. But if so, I do suppose there is a further need to train you in writing. Surely it will come in handy later on.”*

“Who knows?”

“...”

The Handler was clearly dejected. He can still read words though, Seo snorted without care as he threw a knife, the blade hitting the cute swing princess, knocking it off the table.

Kaie, holding her mug with two hands, tilted her head slightly,

“No, it will help, won’t it, Undertaker? Your hobby’s reading anyway... aren’t you reading a philosophy book now? It does look a little difficult.”

There was a terrifying silence from the other end of the Para-RAID.

The Handler spoke up. Her voice remained so kind, and her face might have a smile, but for some reason, there was an abnormal pressure in that voice.

*“Undertaker?”*

“.....Understood.”

*“Please send all reports from this point on, you understand? Battle reports too. Everything.”*

“...Can’t I just send the data from the mission recorder?”

*“Not at all. Please write them.”*

Shinn clicked his tongue. Kaie, who had been peering at his face cautiously, shivered, the ponytail behind her hand swaying. She immediately clapped her hands together and lowered her head in apology, *It’s not your fault*, but Shinn merely waved his hand off.

Goodness... the Handler sighed, and seemed to have realized the reason why he had not been sending the reports. She quelled her heart, and spoke with earnesty.

*“Analysis here will be very useful in formulating tactics. Your battle records as elites will serve to facilitate this. Proper planning will reduce the casualty rate of the frontlines, and also reduce your losses, so I do hope you will assist.”*

“...”

Shinn did not answer, and the Handler Girl remained silent. Perhaps she realized the reason why the Processors did not trust the Handler was due to the latter's side.

Then, the girl's tone became cheery, probably to shake off the awkwardness from before.

*“Anyway, the date of the report seems to be from a long time back, so did you obtain it from someone? Or has it not been modified since then?”*

“Ahh, this lad's always been like this, Handler One. He's always been like this, even before I knew him.”

Raiden hopped in with a teasing voice. It seemed the Handler was blinking in confusion.

*“Werewolf, have you known Undertaker for a long time?”*

Kaie shrugged,

“More than half of us here are like this. For example, Daiya (Black Dog) and Angel (Snow White) were always in the same squad since conscription, while Haruto (Falke) and I were together for a year. Seo (Laughing Fox) and Krena (Gunslinger) joined the squad with Shinn (Undertaker) and Raiden (Werewolf) two years ago... you two have known each other for two years, right?”

“Three years.”

Raiden answered, and the Handler went silent.

*“...How long has it been since you were conscripted?”*

“Everyone's in the fourth year. Ahhh, Undertaker's the most experienced

here, this is his fifth year.”

The Handler seemed encouraged.

*“So, Undertaker is about to finish service... what do you intend to do once you retire? Is there any place you want to go to, or what you want to see?”*

Everyone focused their attention on Shinn. The latter continued to stare at the book, and flatly answered,

“Who knows. I never thought of that.”

*“I, see... but, I do think it is good to think about it now. Maybe you might think of something; I’m sure it will be enjoyable.”*

Suddenly, Shinn smiled. The sleepy cat next to him pricked its ears, and looked up towards him,

“Maybe it is.”

## Chapter 3 - Your Inspiring Appearance As You Stand Before the Gates of Hades

Half a month had passed since Lena took command as Handler of Squad Spearhead.

On that day, there were no casualties in the battle during the day, and Lena, feeling relieved, activated her Para-RAID to contact the Processors as usual. It was after dinner, and she was in her room.

Over the past half month, Spearhead had more sorties than the other squads, but there were no dead amongst the processors. It seemed they were the real deal as elite veterans.

“Calling in now to say good work for the day.”

She could hear some chaos, probably some distance away, easily drained out by the responses of the processors. It was likely the sounds of night battles in the other battle zones ringing into the hangar.

*“Good work there, Handler One.”*

The first to answer was typically Undertaker. His voice was poised and quiet, with no hint of his moniker “death god.”

There were a few others who connected through the Para-RAIDs, giving their greetings.

There was the Vice-Commander Werewolf, crude in words yet a reliable big brother to the squad.

There was the polite, blunt Kirschblüte who would be first to answer everything, including the stupid talk.

The burly mood maker, Black Dog.

The Snow Witch whose voice and personality were equally kind.

And the Laughing Fox who would spew vicious words with the soft voice of a

girl.

The first impression Lena had of the Undertaker was that he was one of few words, rarely talking except when it came to business, but everyone would gather by his side whenever he synchronized with her, and there were a few without Para-RAIDs following him, so he did seem to be adored.

“First off, Undertaker, regarding the resupply you requested for a few days back...”

Raiden overheard the Handler discussing the mission with Shinn as he stared at the crossword puzzle of a magazine he picked up, using it to spend the time.

Shinn’s room was in a dilapidated barracks, and several members were leisurely lazing around in the room. Seo was focusing on sketching; Haruto, Kaie, and Krena were happily playing cards; Angel was sewing complicated looking lace patterns; and Daiya was repairing a broken radio. The others were at the canteen and the other rooms, and from afar, he could hear laughter.

Shinn, as squad leader, had to do various administrative duties like report writing, and he had the largest room in the barracks that doubled as an office. Raiden often came into this room to discuss various matters about the squad, and got several others who came to spice the mood. Thus, it became a place for everyone to rest and interact.

For Shinn, the owner of the room, he simply needed a place to read, and he did not care if the cat next to him shook its tail, that it was the endgame of a thrilling chess match, or whether others did a belly dance before him (Kujo and Daiya actually did so). At this moment, he was conversing with the Handler, lying on the steel bed in his room as usual, his pillow a cushion as he read the old novel he had taken from a random library. The black cat with white paws was crouched quietly on his chest, and it became a common fixture.

How peaceful. He took a sip of coffee from the mug. That was the traditional replacement coffee (Ersatz Café) for Squad Steadfast, the brewing recipe handed down till this point. The ingredients were the Dandelions used in the camp, but it was a lot better than the factory synthesized taste of the mysterious liquid made from the strange black powder.

...What will that old hag say if she's to taste this coffee?

Utterly strict and inflexible, cautious and plain, that old hag would never understand the taste of the coffee.

Even in the eighty five zones, the beverages produced by the factories were no different from the synthesized materials in the Concentration Camps.

Will she still pity people like us?

The cat let out a shrill purr, overlapping the bell-like voice of the Handler.

*Nyaa*, Once she heard the cat during the conversation, Lena was taken aback.

"A... cat?"

*"Yeah, the squad adopted it."*

Black Dog answered.

*"Just to add, I was the one who picked it up. When I was assigned to this squad, I saw this little one squatting in the doors of a house that got blown up by a tank cannon. Its parents and siblings are all dead, this one is the only one left."*

*"And for some reason, it just likes to latch onto Undertaker."*

*"Nobody played with it, patted its head, or combed it."*

*"It's not being clingy. Just being a loyal pet. Look at it."*

*"Well, it's not moving while he's reading. Looks like it's never going to cling onto you, Black Dog."*

*"Hey, that's too much! What's with that logic!? Correct it now! Doo doo doo."*

Lena chuckled as she heard the Processors bicker amongst each other. It seemed they were no different from other boys and girls of her age, and she even wondered why she was not with them.

"What is the name of that cat?"

With a smile, she asked, and the members answered in unison,

*"Blackie."*

*“White.”*

*“Two-fur.”*

*“Kiddo.”*

*“Kitty.”*

*“Lemarck.”*

*“...Seriously, don’t name a cat based on the author of the novel you’re reading. That’s way too casual... anyway, what are you reading man? It’s classless...”*

Laughing Fox was the only one retorting instead of giving a name.

In any case, Lena was confused.

*“Erm... are there many cats there?”*

*“Didn’t you hear us? There’s only one.”*

She remained clueless. Black Dog, unable to take the awkwardness, decided to lend her a hand.

*“It’s a black cat, with white paws, so there are some who call it Blackie, or White, and some call it Two-fur. There’s no fixed name, and everyone just calls it whatever they feel like. Recently though, it’d come running towards us once we yelled at it.”*

*I see.*

*“...But, why raise this cat?”*

*“...Ahh.... well.”*

Black Dog stammered, and was about to answer.

Suddenly, he disconnected from the Para-RAID.

Krena abruptly got up and left the room, toppling the chair, and Daiya, closest to her, hurried over. The sound of the toppled chair echoed through the room.

*“...? Did something happen?”*

Daiya was disconnected, and Krena was never connected in the first place.

Shinn fibbed.

“Oh, there’s a mouse in the room.”

*“Mouse!!?”*

“...That’s too lax of you.”

Seo’s little jab apparently never reached the ears of their Handler.

*A mouse appeared...* the Handler’s voice was trembling, and it seemed she was really terrified of them. Shinn nonchalantly answered as he narrowed his eyes at the door Krena slammed as she stormed out.

Daiya headed to the end of the corridor, and found Krena exhaling hard, venting all the stress in her body.

*Why is everyone, and her...*

Simply hearing her voice left Krena repulsed, anxious, jumpy. Up to this moment, she had spent her nights happily with everyone else, and it was a rare comfortable time for her.

“Krena.”

“Why is everyone, and that woman...”

“Just for now. It’s not long until that princess stops bothering us.”

Daiya shrugged, his eyes filled with honesty, showing his usual frivolous attitude. No matter the Handler, in the past, none of them could handle that “death god.”

That girl had yet to know the real origin of Shinn’s moniker. Such enemies had never shown up, and her luck would soon run out.

The mutated, calamitous Black Sheep amidst the White Sheep of the <Legion>.

These “Black Sheep” were called as such for they were once few in numbers, yet their numbers have far surpassed the “White Sheep” at this point.

And then there were the “Shepherds,” the bigger danger.

Krena gritted her teeth. She knew, she knew that.

“Why hasn’t Shinn dealt with her already?”

She said as she repressed the emotions in her heart, her words oozing with vileness.

“What’s there to bother about that white swine? Our synchronization rate is already set to the minimum.”

“That’s the normal procedure. Shinn didn’t destroy it just because he wanted it.”

The synchronization rate of the Para-RAID was set to the minimum, so as to allow consciousness and messages to be accurately conveyed across the noisy battlefield, such that only the actual person speaking could hear.

Daiya then asked calmly, not in a rebuking manner, but in a coaxing manner.

“Besides, can you say those words to Shinn? I hate her, so please wreck her with that thing of yours. Can you say that?”

Krena pursed her lips, remaining silent. What Daiya said was true.

Shinn and the other squadmates were her allies, her family. She could never say such harsh things to her family.

That should be normal for Shinn.

But.

“Sorry... but I still can’t forgive them. They killed papa, mama, treated them as trash, and shot them like targets.”

On the night she was deported to the Concentration Camp, the Alba soldiers were laughing out loud as they had her parents shot, all just to see where the bullets could hit, how much they could take until they died.

Her sister, seven years older than she was, was sent to the frontlines immediately after they were rounded up. Back then, she was fourteen. Now Krena is already fifteen.

But on that night, someone chased those scoundrels away, ignoring the blood on his body as he did his best to revive her dying parents, yet was unable to

save them. Apologizing them to them was an Alba, a Serena soldier.

“The Whites are all scumbags... I’ll never forgive them.”

Soon, both of them returned to the room, and the topic had long diverted from the mouse to the scenery and usual daily lives on the battlefield.

Daiya merely shrugged as he spotted Raiden looking towards him, and continued to repair the radio. Krena picked up the kitten that was crouched on the bed next to Shinn and started playing with it. However, she may not have been in the mood to do so.

And so Shinn shifted aside, indicating for Krena to sit down. The latter cradled the kitten, looking nonchalant as she sat at the other side of the bed, pulling quite a distance from him.

*“Really? Are there really that many stars to be seen, Kirschblüte?”*

*“Lots of them. I guess it was about two years back, when I just kept looking up, and suddenly a few stars started to fall from the skies. Most of the stars were flowing in trails of light. It’s really an impressive sight.”*

The Kirschblüte Kaie continued to deal the cards, ignoring the fact that Krena had left her seat before.

Raiden too had seen that meteor shower. However, back then, he was in the middle of the battlefield, as both friends and foes were obliterated, with Shinn alone next to him. The “Juggernauts” they piloted had depleted their power packs, and the straggling Fido hurriedly wandered the battlefield, gathering them. They could not smile, let alone marvel at this sight.

There were no lights lit on the battlefield, and thus at night, the surroundings remained dark. That might be the endless darkness. On the ground, they could not see the fingers of their outstretched hands, and in the skies above, the white flames continued to slide across. The silent, breathtakingly majestic scenery was so beautiful, so radiant, as though the world was breaking into pieces, the end of the world declared.

*I guess it's worth seeing such a scene before we die.* Raiden really regretted saying that back then. That bastard let out a chuckle.

"I'll probably never get to see it again for the rest of my life... comets can be seen every year, but a meteor shower is like once in a few decades, and it's said that such a massive one can't be seen in a hundred years... oh, I heard that from Kujo (Sirius)."

*"It's a pity... I want to have a look too."*

"You can't see them within the Wall (over there)?"

*"The streets here are covered in light. I cannot see the stars."*

"Ahh."

Kaie chuckled. How nostalgic it was for her.

"Now that you mention it... the night here is really dark. Not many people around here, it's far from the city, and the lights are controlled, so we're always able to see the stars in the night sky, so full of them. This is a benefit of living here."

"..."

Upon hearing Kaie's conclusion, the Handler went silent. She probably heard an unexpected answer. Perhaps she had assumed there was nothing good to hear from the mouths of the Processors, living in the Hell on Earth.

A strange voice raised this question.

That voice was filled with conviction, one ready to be lambasted and reproached.

*"Kirschblüte... d-do you hate us?"*

Kaie was momentarily silent.

"...Well, the painful discrimination is just tough, of course. It's not easy being in the Concentration Camp, and every day we go out to battle is scary. Those people who imposed this lifestyle and duty on us, dismissing the Eighty Sixers as livestock instead of humans are not popular, to say the least."

The Handler was about to say something, probably to apologize or blame

herself, but Kaie continued on. Naturally, she had no intention of letting the Handler speak up.

“But I know not all Albas are bad... just like how not all Eighty Sixers are good people.”

“Eh...?”

Kaie suddenly pursed her lips bitterly.

“I’m a Far East Black (Orienta). Back in the Concentration Camp and my old squad, I encountered some things.”

Not only her, but Angel too... and though he did not mention it, Shinn probably suffered the same thing. Those that had the mixed blood of the oppressed, the Eighty Sixers, and the oppressors, the Albas, or the Empire’s nobles, their status was taken as a pretext to be detained. They were all the target of frustration and unhappiness. The rare races of the Republic, originating from the east and the south, were also discriminated for no reason at all.

Not all Eighty Sixers were innocent victims.

To the minority and the weak, the world remained so cold, indifferent towards them.

“Anyways, there are good ones amongst the Albas. I’ve never met them personally, but there are those I know who said so. So I won’t hate you just because you are an Alba.”

*“I see... so I guess I will have to thank them all.”*

Kaie leaned forward a little. They were only synchronized, but seemed as though they were talking face to face.

“I have a question. Why do you care about us?”

A scorching image suddenly appeared in Shinn’s mind, and he lifted his eyes.

He had never encountered any fire or flaming torture; it seemed these were the memories of the Handler.

“I remember being saved by others. Those people were Processors, just like

you...”

Lena recalled.

“We’re born to this country, raised in this country, citizens of the Republic.”

“Nobody admits to this now, but that’s why we have to prove ourselves. Fighting to protect our country is our duty, and honor as citizens. That is why we will fight.”

*I want to respond to the words of that person who saved me.*

*“He said that he’s fighting to prove his identity as a citizen of the Republic. I feel that we need to answer that call. I feel it is a betrayal of ideals to have you fight, be sacrificed, and not acknowledging you, let alone not trying to understand you well... it is unforgivable, I feel.”*

Upon hearing such naïve words, Raiden narrowed his eyes.

Kaie tilted her head as she heard that, and pondered for a moment, saying,

“Handler One, you really are a virgin.”

—Pfffff!?

Heard was the sound of tea spat from the lips of the Handler. She was not the only one, for the air burst out from the lungs of the other members.

Krena and Haruto, the only ones not synchronized, tilted their heads in confusion, and once they heard Angel’s explanation, they too burst out laughing.

The Handler girl continued to cough away.

Kaie was initially perplexed by everyone’s reactions, before her face started to pale,

“...Ahh! Sorry, my mistake here! I wanted to say that you’re like a virgin!”

Typically, such mistakes would not be made. Even so, the meaning was similar.

Daiya and Haruto were cupping their cramping tummies, slamming on the

wall (Shut up! And Kino, who was next door, growled back). Even Shinn showed a rare reaction, his shoulders shaking.

Kaie panicked.

“Erm, I want to say that, you’re the type of girl who thinks that the whole world is covered in flowers, or that there’s a perfect, innocent ideal. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is...”

Clearly the Handler had frozen in place, her face beetroot.

“...You’re not a bad person. So, one piece of advice for you.”

Kaie finally appeared to have calmed down, as she said,

“You are not suited for this position. And you shouldn’t be caring about us. We’re not fighting for such noble reasons, so you don’t have to care about us... better swap yourself out before you regret it.”

*You’re not a bad person*, so Kaie said.

*You’re a good person*, yet that was not what she said.

Back then, Lena did not understand the distinction between them.

“Handler One to all forces. Enemy forces detected on radar.”

On this day, all forces of Squad Spearhead sortied. Lena was in the control room, watching the screen as she said,

“It’s an enemy squad of Grauwolf and Löwe. And a few anti-tank cannons (Stier) following—”

*“We know, Handler One. Ready to intercept at Point 478.”*

“Ah... understood. Undertaker.”

She was about to convey the positions of the enemies and the operation strategy, only to be cut off, and could only affirm blankly.

Squad Spearhead, a gathering of veterans, had no need for Lena’s leadership,

and recently, her main job was to provide all kinds of assistance to support them, including analyzing the enemy, escalating the priority for resupply, visit the information branch every day, search for intel pertaining to the battle zone, and so on.

Over the past few days, she had been repeatedly requesting permission to use the intercepting cannon at the back of the battle zone. It had enough range, and at the very least, suppressed the firepower from the Scorpions, which should make the battles a little easier. However, the interception cannon was for single use, to be realigned after every shot. The transport team however did not wish to spend much effort for the inferior Eighty Sixers, and were unwilling to shift them. Thus, she could never get the permit. When she grumbled about it during her regular contact, *"That thing's all rusty now, isn't it?"* she was rebuffed by Laughing Fox.

*"Undertaker. Gunslinger here in position."*

*"Laughing Fox to Undertaker. Team Three in position."*

The teams quickly arrived at their designated locations, having predicted the path of the <Legion> as they remained in flawless ambush positions.

It seemed they had established where the <Legion> was going and attacking, and the Processors of Spearhead might have seen something, or independently determined their positions.

Let's ask them while this battle is over, Lena thought. If their methods could be shared with the other squads, perhaps that might reduce the number of Processors killed in ambushes. Precious intel was only useful personally, and one major flaw of this twisted battle system, was that the data could not be gathered and disseminated.

In any case, she had a look at the map of the first battlezone she found on the prior night, and said,

*"Undertaker, please have Gunslinger positioned at 500 meters away, in the three o'clock direction. There should be a high tower over there that can be used for cover. It should be able to allow for a prone position for shooting, and enhanced vision."*

After a pause, Undertaker answered,

*“Affirming... Gunslinger, can you see that position?”*

*“Hold on, give me ten seconds... yes, there is. I shall head there.”*

“That position will cover the opposite direction as the vanguard team one is attacking towards. Considering that Undertaker’s basic strategy is to break their ranks and eliminate them, this should help hide our forces in the initial phase better than before.”

Werewolf snickered.

*“So basically, used as bait. You sound like a Princess there, but it sure is interesting.”*

“...The Löwe and Stier units are unable to shoot at high angles, and thus unable to attack gunners from high vantage pages. Also, if there is a need to shift, she can evade using the surrounding landscape...”

*“Don’t misunderstand... that is a good idea. Right, Gunslinger?”*

*“Fine with anything as long as it can help others.”*

The girl tersely responded, and directed her icy tone at Lena.

*“You found a new map? How convenient huh?”*

Lena grimaced. It seemed she was unable to get on the good side of this girl called the Gunslinger. Not even once did the latter participate in the daily contact, and even in the usual conversations, she was full of spite.

The map Lena had was once created by the military, with a lot of time and manpower put into it. It was detailed; however, it was said the map never made it to the frontline bases acting as important defense points. The map Squad Spearhead had was salvaged from a random pile of trash, by one of their ex-members, and they had been using it up to this point after much was added and edited. They were familiar with some locations and routes that would be beneficial to counterattack, but other than that, they were not familiar with the landscape at all.

*“Should I send it over later?”*

The data was massive, and it was inconvenient to send during the battle, so perhaps it would not be late for her to send it later.

Werewolf's voice was full of ridicule.

*"That's fine. But is it fine to send a classified military map to enemy citizens (Eighty Sixers)?"*

"It is fine. Information is to be used after all."

Upon hearing her response, Werewolf went silent and let out a little sigh, probably out of lament.

Lena rummaged this map from a pile of cardboard boxes that was unmanaged, and nobody knew where it was before she found it. Nobody knew if it was lost or stolen, let alone photocopied, surely that was no classified information.

Nine years ago, when the war started, all forces of the military, including the backline, charged to the battlefield, and were slaughtered. Thus, the information and the empty positions were never passed down properly, resulting in much information being lost.

And the pride of professional soldiers, who should have dealt with such issues decisively, was gone.

"Also, none of you are just Eighty Sixers. I have never called you that—"

*"Yes yes... they're here."*

A tense atmosphere lingered. Some of them seemed excited, probably due to confidence as veterans, or due to the mass amounts of adrenaline being pumped into their bodies during an intense battle.

The roars of the cannons riveted her ears through the synchronized hearing.

On the chaotic battlefield, the red blips of the <Legion> started to dwindle in numbers.

The first team of Spearhead waded through the forest in the battlezone, and wiped out the Stier that had strong firepower but low defence and mobility. In

the meantime, they lured the Grauwolf and the Löwe into the forest, intercepted them, and took them down one at a time. Due to the many obstacles in the forest, the Löwe had difficulty turning back, and unable to display its usual mobility, its firing range was greatly hindered. The <Legion> was forced to scatter in the cramped space, resulting in a loss of numerical advantage on their page.

To a bystander, they were very familiar in their actions, but in fact, the battle was not easy for them. The “Juggernaut” piloted by Kirschblüte barely managed to avoid a shot, ducked into a grove of trees, and tried to get to the left of the Löwe.

Lena immediately felt a chill. The positioning of the Löwe was a little strange. That enemy unit should not be there, given where the other enemy units were positioned. There was no way that single unit could provide cover for the surrounding units.

She frantically identified where Kirschblüte was headed, a clearly marked area on the map of the battlezone, which the latter would not know, a certain thing that seemed to be covered—

“Do not go there! Kirschblüte!”

“Eh?”

But it was too late to stop her

The blip indicating the position of the Kirschblüte came to an unnatural halt on the radar.

“...What? A wetland...!?”

Kaie shook hard due to inertia as her unit came to a rattling halt, groaning. Based on the screen, it appeared that the two front legs of her unit were sunk deep into the ground, she realized however that she was standing on wetlands, which only resembled grasslands due to the dark forest. This was a death trap for a “Juggernaut,” for the pressure its legs exert onto the ground was huge.

*Anyway, I should retreat from here as soon as possible.* So Kaie thought as she

held her joysticks—

*“Kirschblüte! Get out of there!”*

She lifted her head upon Shinn’s warning. The optical sensors of the Kirschblüte drifted upwards along with her eyes.

Before her eyes was a Löwe.

*“...Ah.”*

The distance between the two was at bare minimum, and the Löwe swung its front legs. Viciously. The spinning gears moved the joints, no matter how the prey under its feet whimpered.

*“No.”*

Her voice was feeble, like a child on the verge of crying.

*“I don’t want to die.”*

The gears spun, and the massive legs able to move fast and support a mass of fifty tonnes slapped the Kirschblüte aside.

The joints were very feeble, and once it took an impact beyond a limit, the insides would be sent flying. This clamshell-like cockpit, dubbed the “guillotine” by the Processors, splintered apart as befitting of its name.

Something round landed on the ground with a thud, rolled into the greenery, and vanished.

After a moment of shock, the communication system was overwhelmed with growls and rage.

*“Kirschblüte!? —Shit!!”*

*“Undertaker, I’m going to retrieve her. Give me a minute! We can’t just leave her like that!”*

Shinn answered, his voice as calm as ever, like water beneath the icy surface of a winter lake.

*“It’s pointless, Snow Witch... it’s a trap, and they’re lying in wait.”*

The Löwe that had killed Kaie remained hidden there. It's a common tactic often used by Snipers, to lay out an injured soldier or corpse in an obvious position, and kill any enemies who come to aid or retrieve.

Angel did not answer, instead hitting her fist onto the dashboard, which gave a thud. The "Snow White" continued to fire 57mm grenades upon the Kirschblüte and the area around it.

"Kirschblüte is KIA. Kino (Fafnir), assist Team Four... the enemies are few now, eliminate them before they breach her."

*"Understood."*

The calm response was not swallowed in rage. These "codenamed" were already too used to seeing their friends blown up before them, or the signals of their friends lost on the radar, so much so that they were numb. Agony would have to wait for its turn after the battle ended, for they would otherwise be buried as well. This damned sense of rationality was forged through the flames of war, such that they had to set all feelings aside, except for the necessity of remaining calm. Such was the decision made after being used to the madness of the battlefield, as humans were gradually imbued with the subconsciousness of a fighting machine.

For a moment, in the blink of an eye, the four-legged spiders creaked, giving off weird footstep sounds as they entered the darkness of the greenery.

They slaughtered everything, like a bunch of wandering skeletons before the Gates of Hades, so that after they sent her off, their departed comrade would not feel lonely.

Soon after, the forces of the <Legion> were liquidated. None could retreat, and they were all eliminated without a trace, in a demonstration of the wills of the Processors. Lena felt a pain in her heart.

Two days ago, just two days ago, she heard the deceased one describe the majestic scene of the meteor shower, and those proud words. Regret surged into her heart like a tide.

If only she could have found the map sooner.

If only she had alerted them earlier.

“Battle is over. Good work, everyone.”

Nobody responded. Everyone was probably in anguish.

“With regards to the death of Kirschblüte... my regrets. If only I could only done a little more...”

At that moment,

A terrifying silence came from the other end of the Para-RAID.

“...*Regret?*”

Uttering back was Laughing Fox. His voice was calm, yet clattering, trying his best to control his rage.

*“What are you regretting? What’s the deaths of an Eighty Sixer or two to you? Once you get home from work, you’ll just forget about it, and have a happy dinner, right? All you know is saying such pretty words. You know how empty they are!?”*

For a moment, she was taken aback, not knowing what he was saying, and not knowing how she should answer.

*Hey,* It was unknown what feelings Laughing Fox had when Lena was at a loss of words, for he sighed, and continued, with clear hostility, disgust, and rage,

*“You said you wouldn’t discriminate against others, won’t think of us as pigs, call yourself so pure and righteous. That’s just a game for you to beautify yourself as a Saint, because we were bored. Mind reading the mood here though? We just lost a comrade. No time to entertain your fake goodness, get it?”*

“Fa—”

Fake goodness?

*“Or do you think that we don’t feel anything just because a comrade died? – Haha, yeah, for you, Eighty Sixers are just a bunch of Eighty Sixers, pigs who are beneath humans, and no way can the exalted humans reason with those beneath them!”*

“No...”

The sudden words left Lena’s mind completely blank.

“No! I wasn’t...!”

*“No? Then what else? You dump us onto the battlefield as weapons, have us fight to the death, and hide within the walls, just enjoying the show with an uppity face there. If that’s not calling us Eighty Sixers as ‘pigs,’ then what?”*

“...”

The feelings of the Processors seeped into her heart through the Para-RAID.

Some were unconcerned, while others, like Laughing Fox, were giving looks of varying levels of coldness, with malice, disgust, and forsakenness.

*“Not calling us Eighty Sixers!? **You just haven’t called us that**, that’s all! What ‘protecting this country is our pride as citizens, that we have to respond to the call. Do you think we came to fighting a war willingly!? Isn’t it because you chased us out here and forced us to fight!? Do you know how many millions died ever since the war started!? You don’t care about ending the war, just say those nice words everyday, and think that’s enough to think of us as humans. You—”*

With one sentence after another, Laughing Fox proceeded to slap her face verbally.

Lena had assumed she was thinking of them as people. That was all. What he said next was the decisive proof that she did not, gorging blood out from her bright, sparkling heart.

*“—Never bothered asking for our names anyway, haven’t you!?”*



At that moment, she forgot to breathe.

“Ah...”

She recalled the conversations they had, and went into a state of shock. Right, she did not know their names, and never once did she ask them. She could not call any of them by their names, whether it was the Undertaker who always answered first, or the enthusiastic Kirschblüte. Naturally, she never gave her name, only referring to herself as Handler One, the codename indicating that she was the manager and invigilator. She never felt anything amiss about it.

Such was an act of disrespect between humans, one that was absolutely unforgivable, unless it was an established guideline.

She unwittingly did so, without realizing it.

Pets should be treated as pets.

She recalled her mother saying this, and herself acting this way. Other than the fact that she never blurted it out, how was she any different from her mother—

Her body started to shiver. Tears welled from her eyes, dripping like trails of pearls off a loose thread. She could not say anything, and could whimper. She covered her mouth with both hands. She had unwittingly trampled upon others, never feeling a sense of remorse. She was terrified upon seeing the ugly face hidden in her heart, and was terrified.

Werewolf, no, the Colorata boy she referred to as such, whose name and appearance she did not know of, hissed back.

“Seo.”

*“Raiden! Why protect this white swine—!?”*

“Seeeo.”

*“Tch... got it.”*

The click of a tongue rang. Laughing Fox’s presence vanished from the Para-

RAID.

Werewolf gave a long sigh, venting all his feelings out from his heart, and directed his words towards her,

*"Handler One, disconnect."*

*"...Werewolf, erm."*

*"The battle has ended. We have no duty bound to be managed... what Laughing Fox did was too much, but this does not mean that we are willing to chat around with you."*

The icy cold tone had no intention to criticize, yet it sounded exceptionally cruel to Lena's ears.

He never berated her insolence. He never blamed her, showing that he had given up on her. In any case, while they pretended to talk, she had no intention to listen, and did not know what she was saying. To him, she was simply a swine resembling a human. He had already given up.

*"...Sorry."*

She suppressed the trembling in her voice as she eked those words out, and after a pause, she disconnected. None of them responded to her apology.

After disconnecting with the Handler and the other squadmates, Seo felt unbearable.

And then, Angel finally connected with him.

*"Seo."*

*"...I know."*

He grumbled. He hated his immature response, and pouted in anger.

*"I understand how you feel, but you were too much there. Even if it was the truth, you should not have said so."*

*"I understand... sorry."*

He understood. He had promised everyone that he would not do that. There was no need to emphasize anything that was understood, and he had abided by this promise up to this point.

He expressed everything in his heart with the harshest words he could think of, but his heart could never be quelled. Instead, he was increasingly agitated, and that infuriated him. The sharp words also hurt his irreplaceable squadmates, the ones he should not be hurting.

He broke that promise. He broke that important promise, because of that damned white swine.

But he could not endure. For surely it was because,

*"...Of that Squad Leader?"*

"...Yeah."

He recalled the massive back.

When he was twelve, and had just enrolled, he met the Leader of his first squad.

He was cheerful, bubbly, and yet ostracized by everyone in the squad. Back then, even Seo hated him.

The personal codename "Laughing Fox" was inherited from him. Back then, Seo's sketching skills were not decent in any way, and he could only doodle on the smiling Fox under the canopy of the Leader's "Juggernaut", turning it into a sneer of a mischievous fox.

Once he heard that white swine talk like a self-professed Saint, with the same expression as that Leader, acting sympathetic over Kaie's death, Seo could not bear it anymore.

A single moment of impulse resulted in the outcome he was most unwilling to see.

"...Sorry, Kaie."

He lowered his eyes when he saw the remains of the burnt "Kirschblüte." He had seen countless of his comrades' corpses, but for her, he could not bury her when she was in front of him, and neither could he retrieve her corpse.

“I did what that white swine did. I wasted your sacrifice.”

To you, who stood so proudly even after experiencing so much, and never grumbled anything until the very end.

Each night a squadmate died, the rest would be alone or in groups, mourning for the dead in their own ways. Nobody entered Shinn’s room.

The light of the moon and the many stars filled the room, such that there was no need to switch the lights on. Shinn had his eyes closed under this cold light. Suddenly, he heard a tapping on the window from the outside, and opened his bloody red eyes.

Outside the windows of the barracks was Fido, extending its crane arms to the second level, and with the manipulators, handed over the metal plate that was several centimetres wide.

“Thanks.”

“Pii.”

Shinn received the plate, and Fido flickered its optical sensors, before creaking as it turned around, and returned to the automated reclamation plant to deliver the container full of debris. Such was the actual job of a “Scavenger.”

Once he laid out the metal plate on a piece of cloth, the Para-RAID was activated.

Shinn stopped his hand from undoing the cloth bag of basic tools, and frowned. He was the only one being synchronized to, and the other party was not a member of this base.

“...”

But once she contacted him, she never said anything, a feeling of pain and sadness instead lingering. Shinn sighed, and asked,

“Is there anything, Handler one?”

It seemed her shoulders jolted, but she remained silent, probably hesitant. Shinn did not mind, waiting patiently for her to speak up.

He continued with his work, and after a while, the Handler girl finally let out a quivering voice. This time, Shinn did not stop what he was doing as he heard the probing, delicate voice that was still fearful of rejection.

*"...Erm..."*

If he had refused, she would simply disconnect obediently, so she thought.

With this notion in mind, Lena was terrified as she heard the usual, calm voice.

Again and again she tried easing her breathing, preparing to talk, and after several tries, she finally let out a voice.

*"...Erm, Undertaker. Is it convenient now...?"*

*"Yeah sure."*

It was a calm, steady, monotonous voice of a flat reply.

Once she heard that usual tone, she finally understood that it was not a display of his calmness, but that he was simply aloof towards her.

She lowered her head, berating her heart for hesitating due to fear.

Perhaps it was still despicable of her.

She should have introduced herself to every member. However, she had no courage to try contacting Laughing Fox or Werewolf, who would surely not be contacted again.

*"My apologies. For what happened in the day, and everything before, I am really sorry... erm."*

She clenched her fists that were placed on her knees.

*"My name is Lena. Vladlena Millize. It might be late for me to ask now... but do you mind telling me of your names...?"*

The silence lingered for a while.

Lena felt utter apprehension in this silence. The voice coming from afar emphasized this silence before her.

*"...If you are bothered by what Laughing Fox just said..."*

The voice was still filled with coldness. It was aloof, straightforward, an objective narration.

*“Then you have no need to do so. What he said isn’t representative of what all of us think. This isn’t a problem you alone caused, and it’s unlikely you would have been able to do anything with your own power. We understand. What he is blaming is what you couldn’t do, there’s no need to mind.”*

“But... it is my fault for not asking everyone their names.”

*“There’s no need for that. The Para-RAID synchronization is designed so that the <Legion> won’t eavesdrop, but we do need to identify each other through codenames. Why do you think the personal particulars of the Processors aren’t disclosed?”*

Lena pursed her lips. It was not difficult to realize the reason, though it was not a glorious one to begin with.

“So that the Handlers will never think of the Processors as humans.”

*“Yeah. Most of the Handlers won’t live past a year. It’s way too much responsibility for a single Handler to deal with so many deaths. Probably out of this consideration.”*

“This is too despicable! I...”

She recovered, and her voice once again shrivelled.

“I too am despicable... but I don’t want to remain like this possible. If you’re willing... can you please, tell me your names?”

Shinn could only sigh at this unexpectedly obstinate Handler girl.

“The real name of today’s KIA Kirschblüte is Kaie Tanya.”

“I”

There was a clearly delighted squeal from the other end of the Para-RAID, but it was stifled once she realized it was the name of the girl who had just died on the day itself. In contrast, Shinn calmly gave the names of his squadmates.

“Vice Commander Werewolf’s name is Raiden Shuga. Laughing Fox is Seo Lica.

Snow Witch is Angel Ema. Gunslinger is Krena Cucumila. Black Dog is Daiya Iruma—”

After the names of the twenty squadmates, the Handler concluded them,

*“I am Vladlena Millize. Please call me Lena.”*

“Heard that just now... your rank is?”

*“Ah... yes. Major. Just appointed.”*

“So is it fine for me to call your Major Millize?”

*“...Goodness.”*

Lena gave a wry smile upon hearing Shinn’s insistence to call her his superior.

And then, she finally thought of something, asking,

*“Nobody seems to be around today...what are you doing?”*

Shinn was momentarily silent.

“—A name.”

*“Eh?”*

“I’m engraving Kaie’s name now... us Eighty Sixers have no graves.”

He raised the little metal plate, put it under the moonlight, and inspected it. The rectangular aluminium alloy had Kaie’s name engraved upon it, the reddened part with black words upon it. On the picture of the five-petaled cherry blossom petal, the word “Kirschblüte” of her native tongue was written, the personal codename of Kaie’s “Juggernaut.”

“In the first Squad I was in, I had a promise with others to engrave the names of those KIA on the debris of their units, and the survivors are to keep them. The ones to finally live on will carry the pieces of those dead along.”

Initially, they were unable to obtain the debris of some units, and could only use other metal plates or wooden boards to replace, and engrave the names of the dead with nails, as proof that they once existed.

Once Fido learned of this, it started to compromise and obtain the debris of the unit. It also learned to cut off the personal mark of the dead that was

located at the bottom of the canopy.

All the metal plates, including the members of his initial squad, and the deceased he encountered later on, were in the equipment box located in the “Undertaker” cockpit. All he wanted to do was to abide by the promise he made with them.

“Back then, the one who lived through to the end was me. I then went to another squad, and ended up being the only one alive again. So I have to bring them along. I need to keep the comrades who fought alongside me all the time.”

Lena felt a sudden jolt in her heart once she heard that calm voice.

She suddenly understood that unlike before, the poise in his voice was not that he was unfazed.

And she was quickly embarrassed by this.

He simply accepted the countless deaths of those around him. Never once did he lament their deaths, for he simply accepted it and took them on.

In the day, he did not simply recognize that a squadmate had died and emptily mourn over her death. He simply took on her death in stride, and that really was more admirable.

“How many have died at this point...?”

*“Five hundred and sixty one, including Kaie.”*

He answered immediately, and she pursed her lips. She did not remember the numbers of those who had died under her command. They were not numerous in numbers, but if she were to be asked, she might not be able to recall precisely.

“...So that’s why you’re called ‘Undertaker.’”

*“That’s one reason.”*

He could only remember his deceased comrades, unable to build graves for them, and imprinted his memories and thoughts about them on the aluminium plates.

It was no wonder that he was so adored. This boy, called the Undertaker, was so kind—

Upon thinking about this.

Lena suddenly widened her eyes.

*“Erm, Undertaker.”*

But even at this moment, Shinn did not realize how he had expressed so little care and concern for everything else. This not only applied to Lena, but also for himself.

*“I do not recall hearing your name...?”*

Shinn blinked his eyes. *Are you unwilling to tell me?* she asked, but that was not the case. It just slipped out of his mind.

*“Sorry. Shinei Nouzen.”*

For Shinn, his name, or personal codename were just identification markers for him, and he did not care about what he was called. He simply answered, only to lift his eyes once he heard Lena gasp.

***“Nouzen...!?”***

Lena repeated that name in a daze.

Thunk! It sounded as though her chair was toppled over as she suddenly stood up.

*“Do you know of someone called Shourei Nouzen? His personal codename is Dullahan, with the personal mark of a white headless skeleton knight...!”*

Shinn widened his eyes slightly.

†

*“Let us have a look at the battlefield, Lena. Have a look at what is going on there.”*

On that day, the Republic’s Colonel Vaclav Millize brought his one daughter, the ten year old Vladlena along to the frontlines, on a scout plane.

“...Are we in the middle of war, father?”

“Yes, of course. At the same time, we are doing something extremely inhumane.”

Vaclav was one of the few survivors of the Republic's army. The subordinates under him fought for their families and compatriots, basked in blood, and yet his beloved country introduced a vicious law that trampled upon their ideals.

They deemed that some of their people, whom they should protect, were not humans, and shooed them out, forcing them to battle.

He was unable to forget an incident that happened on at a certain town.

They hastily conscripted new recruits to replace their corps that were wiped out, and most of them were unemployed due to psychotic tendencies and laziness, lacking in education, and the first mission they received was to shoo away the citizens next to them, with guns. The pitifully little morality they had was wiped away, and all squads started being violent everywhere.

He still remembered that scoundrel shooting down their parents before the children's eyes.

The girl, probably the older sister, bawled out loud, and the younger sister watched this with her icy eyes. This image remained imprinted upon Vaclav's mind.

It was unlikely that they would ever forgive the Albas and the Republic.

“...If we can hurry and stop this... better hurry...”

The scout plane was not flying too fast, so that his young daughter could see everything beyond the <Grand Mur>.

The citizens living in the first legislative zone hardly went out. The fighter plane flew over the production factories along the hilly ravines along the edge of the zones, across the solar power generators, geothermal generators, wind power generators, and across the <Grand Mur> that stood tall and majestic like the mountains. Lena widened her eyes as she saw this scenery for the first time in her life. However, once the plane flew over the skies of the containment zone, she saw the shoddy barracks surrounded by wire fences and mines

draped upon the grasslands as the sunset shone upon it, and her eyes looked increasingly bleak, unlike the enthusiasm she showed before.

Vaclav smiled as he saw his daughter look outside with a grim look. Such a smart maiden; she could observe, learn, and think with her own eyes, even without others teaching her.

It was a military offense to use a military craft for personal use, and have a civilian without permit ride on it, but he did not care. The actual Republic Army consisted of failures wearing military clothes and caps, spending their working time gaming, gambling, and partying after work.

“Head down a little further from the frontlines. I want to show my child what a battlefield is like.”

He told the pilot, who was holding the joystick. A scout plane hardly had the chance to fly beyond the eighty five legislative zones, and since there was hardly a chance to fly far, the pilot enthusiastically agreed by nodding without much of a thought.

“Understood, Colonel... but the area should be a no-fly zone established by the logistics team, right?”

“It’s fine. We’re not flying into a contested area. It’ll be night if we keep flying at this speed. The <Legion> won’t get moving.”

The <Legion> would typically move in the day, for their power was generated through electricity. The generator-type enemies in the occupied zone, the Admirals, would produce energy packs for the fighting forces in the day, and if the <Legion> units were to run out of power during battle, they could recharge their power through solar panels. As electricity could not be generated at night, they would be shot down once their power ran out. Thus, they typically would avoid fighting at night.

While Vaclav wanted to show Lena how intense a battle against the <Legion> would be...

Nothing compared to the safety of his daughter. As he watched her little back, he grimaced.

Yet Vaclav made a mistake.

Subconsciously, he might have assumed that only the Eighty Sixers would be sacrificed on the battlefield, and did not mind too much.

The <Legion> surrounded them, their contact with the other countries was blocked off, and they could not deploy fighter jets to attack enemy land targets.

The Stachelschwein.

These are the mobile anti-air units of the <Legion> deployed everywhere in the Republic and everywhere else right when the war started, hidden amidst the Eintagsfliege.

The bright lights of the battlefield lit the pitch black sky, and red flames scattered along with a deafening explosion.

The rotor blades on the left wing got hit as the scout plane let out a trail of blaze, lost its balance, and gradually fell towards the ground.

One Squad Leader was on patrol at night as he witnessed this scene.

“...Hey, there was a scout plane.”

“Huh? Ohh, forget about it, Dullahan. Probably some dumb swine who flew a plane to see the frontlines. Isn't it great for us Eighty Sixers to see several dead white swines?”

The leader did not hear his words, instead closing the hatch of his cockpit, and activated his beloved unit. Bloody red hair, and pitch black iris in the eyes.

“Hey Dullahan...”

“I'm going to save them... continue with the patrol.”

A sea of fire surrounded her when she opened her eyes.

Lena's hands were on the ground as she supported her body off it, staring around in a daze.

Everything was ablaze, and her father was not moving in the middle of the

flames, for everything above his torso had vanished.

She heard the calls coming from the outside, and climbed out of the cabin.

Before her was a massive monster she could only see when her head was lifted, its exterior reflecting a blunt silver amidst the flames.

The bloody red eyes were glowing like glass, and the multi-purpose machine guns mounted upon its shoulders were a terrifyingly deep color. The worm-like joints were grinding erratically, and the frame lingered in the air, practically gliding on ice, in a revolting manner.

The pilot, not too far away, was yelling something, and raised the assault rifle on his waist, squeezing the trigger madly. Most of the bullets missed, and the few that did merely grazed the armor. The Ameise paid no heed as it slowly approached him, and nonchalantly swung its front legs forward. At that moment, the upper body of the pilot was severed, and the blood splattered from the severed region like a geyser, the lower body left behind tumbling over.

The Ameise's optical sensor unit then turned to Lena again.

She could only shrink back, at her wits end. At that moment,

*“—Anyone who's still alive there, get down!”*

A booming roar echoed through the speakers. A four-legged spider torqued a trail of fire, charging over with the darkness of the night and the red flames in the background.

The personal mark of the white headless skeleton knight, at the side of the spider, was embellished in Lena's eyes.

It raised the heavy machine guns on its combat arms, and started firing. The heavy machine guns roars, ripping at the ears.

The assault rifle the soldier had just used was a mere toy compared to them. The bullets of the heavy machine gun could easily shoot through concrete walls and armored tanks, and they rushed towards the Ameise like a strong gust, before the latter could turn around.

The thin armor of the Ameise was immediately torn through, becoming a thoroughly deformed piece of scrap metal.

Lena, still dazed amidst the blazing of heavy machine gun fire, lifted her head, and saw the massive spider creaking towards her.

*“You alright?”*

She was increasingly terrified as she heard the monster speak with a human voice and language, remaining silent, and shrivelling. The body of the spider then broke into two, the hatch opened, and someone appeared from within.

It was a boy, approximately twenty, with bloody red hair, a slender body, and black-green spectacles.

The big brother who had just saved her called himself Shourei Nouzen.

She came to the entrance of the place he called <base>. There were many mechanical spiders inside the base, and the stars filled the night sky, a scene not to be seen in the first legislative zone.

There were a few others in the <base>, but this big brother had warned not to approach them. None of them had approached her, only glaring at her from afar, which left her a little terrified.

Once she heard this big brother state his name, Lena blinked her eyes. She never knew, nor had heard of this name.

*“...That is a weird name.”*

*“Yep. Heard that even in the Empire, only the families of dad uses this rare family name. The name too is a weird one.”*

The big brother shrugged with a wry smile.

*“Call me Ray. That’s not a nice name to read huh? It does seem to be a traditional name of my family, but it’s too foreign for the Republic.”*

*“Aren’t you a citizen of the Republic, big brother?”*

*“My parents were born in the Empire, while my little brother and I were born in the Republic... yeah, I got a little brother, about the same age as you are... he should be all grown up now.”*

Ray was smiling as he said this, but looked so lonely. His eyes were filled with nostalgia and bitterness, as though he was looking not too far away.

“You haven’t see him?”

“...Yeah. I can’t go back.”

Until the end of their service, the Eighty Sixers could never go back, and not rest on any day. Back then, Lena did not know that.

*Are you hungry?* he asked, and she remembered that she had yet to eat, but she was not feeling hungry, and shook her head. Ray’s eyes became earnest, *You should be able to drink some sweet stuff, right?* He plopped a piece of chocolate into hot water, and handed it to her. Though she was young, Lena realized such treatment was rare at such places.

“...Father once said.”

“Hm?”

“That we did cruel things to Colorata. You’re one too, big brother. Why did you save me?”

Ray had a torn look on his face upon being posed this direct question from the girl. The latter had seen such a face before, the face of an adult who would try to answer what would be a complex question for her.

“...Well, we are being cruelly treated now, our freedoms are taken away, our dignities trampled upon. This is unforgivable for anyone, and those who did that are unforgivable. We were treated like that, branded as lower than humans, citizens, barbaric, violent, despicable pigs.”

The impressionable, icy rage flickered in those black eyes for a moment, for faded in an instant. He took a mug, had a sip of water, and tried to swallow that rage down.

“But we do belong to this country, and are citizens of the Republic, born to this country.”

It was a calm sentence filled with determination and ruggedness, echoing in Lena’s ears.

“Nobody now is willing to admit, but it’s because of this that we’re working

hard to prove this. We're fighting to protect our country, and it's our duty and honor as citizens. That's why we're able to fight, and protect through battle. We will protect... and no way will we do worse than those who will only work with their mouths."

Lena blinked in confusion. Battle, for the sake of protecting, to prove. However, the enemy were such massive monsters.

"Are you not scared...?"

"Of course I am. But if I don't fight, I can't live on."

He shrugged and smiled, lifted his head, and looked up at the starry sky.

The stars filled every corner of the night skies, glittering away, resulting in a terrifying silence. Appearing between the stars was an endless void, a dignified night.

The smile vanished from Ray's face. With every word, he punctuated a solemn oath.

"I won't die, and I can't die. I'll have to live on, to find my little brother."

†

To this day, the sixteen year old Lena could still remember the earnest look and words from Ray.

And so when she heard of a family name similar to his, she stood up in excitement, not caring that the chair was toppled over, or that her teacup had fallen over and shattered.

Ray had mentioned that his last name was rare even in the Empire, and Lena had never met anyone else called "Nouzen." This boy with a similar name might be family to Ray, or even the one who was of similar age to her—

Finally, Shinn spoke up.

He appeared to have been momentarily dumbfounded, for it was the first time she had heard such a stupefied voice from him.

*"...That's my older brother."*

"Older brother... then."

*I haven't met him*, he said. *I want to meet him*, he said. That person once swore

*I see, so he's the little brother.*

"He did say that he really wanted to meet you, that he had to go back... may I ask how your older brother is doing?"

Lena anxiously asked, for she was overwhelmed with nostalgia, but Shinn's voice was back to being icy.

*"He died. Five years ago. On the Eastern Front."*

Ah.

*"...My apologies."*

*"No."*

A terse answer from him that implied it really was nothing.

Lena was slightly confused by how Shinn's attitude was so different from Ray's when the latter talked about the former. He remained silent, but it seemed he was not being aloof, as though he was familiar with death.

While she was wondering what she should say, Shinn quietly spoke.

*"You asked me, what do I want to do once I retire, right?"*

*"Ah... yes."*

*"I don't really have anything I want to do, whether it's now or when I retire. There is something I have to do however... I need to find my older brother. I have been looking for him over the past five years."*

Lena tilted her head in confusion. He knew that his brother had died, so that meant,

*"You wish to find... his body?"*

He seemed a little agitated.

It was not a smile, more of a sneer, one icy and heartless as compared to before.

His eyes were as alluring as a sharp, terrifying blade of ice, filled with

madness.

“—No.”

†

The following day.

After hearing a brief explanation from Shinn, the Handler synchronized with the squad, apologized, and asked for their names, one by one. This left Seo really awkward.

“...Shinn. Mind if you don’t do anything unnecessary?”

“You’re regretting it now, right? You shouldn’t have said that anyway.”

Daiya showed a smirk, while Angel showed a tender look in her eyes. *Damn it Krena, why are you looking away and acting like it has nothing to do with you? You were just as angry as I was. You would have yelled if I didn’t.*

“I heard that you’re Major Millize. Didn’t Shinn tell you our names?”

*“I did hear from him. But I never heard any of you mention your names.”*

*So you’re can’t call us by our names until we have forgiven you? You’re troublesome.*

Shinn remained silent, and Lena appeared to be a child who was shrivelling, waiting to be scolded, for she knew she was in the wrong. Seo showed a frustrated look, either because he was peeved, or that he was uncooperative.

“The Leader who was first assigned to our squad.”

This sudden diversion of topic left Lena slightly perturbed, but he continued,

“Was as happy as an idiot, and was already a soldier to begin with... an Alba.”

He could hear a gasp from the other end of the Para-RAID.

“He survived the first defenses, and said that it was weird for just the Eighty Sixers to fight, so he came to the frontlines. My squadmates never said anything in front of him, but they badmouthed him behind his back many times. Anyway, he was really irritating, already an irritating one to begin with. He said that everyone’s a Processor, but he’s the one who chose to come here, while we never had a choice. Even if he did come here, he could have gone back home if

he got sick of this. We all got angry whenever he pretended to be one of us. Everyone was betting on when he would use up all his pity and go back.”

“...”

“But we were all wrong. That Leader never went back, even until the very end. He died without going back. He protected the other Processors, remained behind, and died.”

The last to hear his words was Seo. Seo was the closest to the Leader as they left him behind, and at that moment, the latter contacted him through the wireless communicator, asking to hear him out, even if they paid no heed to his words.

—I know you guys hate me. It’s normal, I won’t say anything about it.

—Of course you guys hate me. I didn’t come here to help you after all, and not to save you.

—I just feel that if I let you guys fight, I’ll never be able to forgive myself. I’m scared of becoming like that. I came to this battlefield for my own sake, and of course, I won’t be forgiven.

—Don’t ever forgive me.

Suddenly, the wireless communicator was filled with static, and silence beckoned. Seo finally understood that Leader knew such a day would come, and never once synchronized with them on the Para-RAID. He had already made up his mind, that when he returned to the battlefield a second time, he would die in battle and never return.

Seo regretted it, he regretted that he could never say a few words to the Leader. Even at this moment, he regretted it.

“Look, I don’t want you to do the same thing as that leader. I just want to say that, as long as you remain there behind the walls, you’ll never be equals to us, and that we’ll never be comrades of yours. That’s all.”

Once he said what he wanted to say, he did a lazy stretch. It was clearly a past of his everyone else had known, self-explanatory, and something he had thought over many times over. At this point, it would not hurt for him to say

this.

“That’s all I have to say here... ahh, I’m Seo Lica. Just call me Seo, or Lica, or cute shitty pig, anything you like.”

*“This is not a trivial matter... I do apologize, for everything through yesterday, really.”*

“That’s enough already. Goodness, you’re annoying.”

*“So when Kaie talked about that good person... that was who she was referring to?”*

“Not just that leader. That goes for everyone else who came back to fight, like him.”

Everyone else was also fighting against this tragic world, created by those of their kind.

“...”

Raiden then introduced himself.

“This is the Vice Commander Raiden here... first off, I’ve got to apologize here. We thought you were just showing pity and acting like a Saint when you keep contacting us every night, and we were laughing at you, a swine who never knew how pretentious you were. We all have to apologize about that. Our bad. And also.”

The black, metallic eyes coldly narrowed.

“As Seo said, we don’t think of you as equals, or a comrade. You are the idiot who trampled upon us and said such pretty words from high up. That will never change, and we can’t really change our opinion here. If you want some people to continue spending time with you though, we don’t mind thinking of it as free time, but I personally don’t recommend doing so. You really aren’t suited to be a Handler... better resign as soon as possible.”

Lena let out a little chuckle.

*“If you do not mind the hassle, please allow me to intrude upon your spare time.”*

Raiden gave a wry smile. His ferocious wolf-like face was filled with a rare trace of human emotion.

“You’re a hopeless idiot too.... ah yeah. Send the map over. You forgot after crying all night long, right?”

This time, Lena smiled again.

*“Immediately.”*

As he nonchalantly overheard their conversations, Shinn recalled the words Lena said.

Shourei Nouzen.

A name he had not heard in a while.

He never thought he would hear that name again. He almost forgot about such a name. Shinn never called that person by his name, even until the very end.

Unwittingly, his right hand reached for the scarf wrapped around his neck.

Brother.

## Chapter 4 - The Headless Knight

All forces of his squad had died, he alone came to hide in the streets of an abandoned city, and when night came, snow started to fall.

Shinn was in an abandoned library, leaning his back on the “Juggernaut” that had countless marks on the armor, the unit dating back to when he was first conscripted a year ago, in a light sleep as he awaited dawn.

For the little body of a twelve year old, the cold of a snowy night was barely tolerable. The library did not collapse, for the thick, heavy walls held their ground. He found a thin blanket in a windowless archive of the library, and draped it over himself. The <Legion>, still wandering around the ruins till a moment back, began their retreat to avoid running out of power and being buried in snow, so he should be able to return to base safely once day arrived. For some reason, however, the “Scavenger” belonging to his old squad, which he called Fido, was always so clingy towards him, and always found him first.

Suddenly, he was beckoned by someone, and opened his eyes.

Ever since he escaped from death, he was able to hear the voices of the dead. Unlike the typical fare, however, he could not hear any voices, instead sensing that he was being beckoned.

It was a call that had vanished a long time back, one he thought he would never hear again.

He was drawn to it, and went outside.

The streets of black metal and dark grey stone was mostly covered in pure white, leaving behind a silhouette. The snow was voiceless, breathless, raining upon his face, fluttering and piling up, dyeing the streets, rubble, and even the black night, as though a white devil was silently rampaging. The beautiful scenery appeared to have whitened the souls.

Passing through the streets of snow and rubble, he came to the center plaza of the town.

And in the middle was a Church, one of its two spires having toppled over, and in the snowy white, it appeared to be a massive skeleton standing in the darkness. He arrived before it.

A wrecked “Juggernaut” had collapsed on the ground, like a fallen skeleton.

The canopy had been blown away, nowhere to be seen, and all that was left was armor that had been deformed due to weather; he could barely see the personal mark of a headless skeletal knight.

He trampled on the snow as he approached it, looking into the cockpit.

“...Brother.”

How did he know? Even if he was asked, he could not answer, other than say that he knew. Shinn was merely convinced that it was a fact, and there was no need for excuses or reasons to explain why.

The cramped, black cockpit was slowly filled white. He lowered his head, and found the faded bones of his brother that laid inside, with his head gone.

## Chapter 5 - <Legio> mini nomen est, quia multi sumus

Lena woke up upon hearing a message notification from her PDA, sat upright, and stretched her body. It remained active, the holographic screen showing a still image from the gun camera, and the battle report printouts forming a sea of paper.

Her window was facing east, and the sunlight shone through the curtains, lighting the room. She picked up the thin robe that was thrown onto the blanket made of near transparent material, put it on, combed her hair simply with her hand, and got off the bed.

She opened the mail, and found it was from Arnett.

*“Next month’s the anniversary of the Revolution. Let’s go pick a party dress during our next break.”*

After a little pause, she sent a reply,

*“Sorry. A little busy recently. Please invite me next time.”*

Arnett quickly responded.

*“I say, Lena, you haven’t been appearing often.”*

And then Arnett sent another message,

*“Even if you do work hard for the Eighty Sixers, you won’t gain anything, you know?”*

Lena turned her head around, and glanced behind her.

She had been analyzing the battle records of Squad Spearhead until she slept. The battle reports were concise and explanatory. The deftness and intelligence of the author was clearly conveyed with the reports, which were sent along with the data files from the Mission Recorder of the “Juggernaut.” Though the patrol reports were devoid of content as per usual, the material obtained was a treasure trove of intelligence to be used in the battle against the <Legion>.

Surely they were not without benefit.

This information would definitely allow everyone to return alive.

*“Sorry.”*

†

“—It should be fine to attend that event, isn’t it?”

Shinn polished the assault rifle that was usually placed in the cockpit of his “Juggernaut” as he flatly replied to the one on the other end of the Para-RAID. Other than her daily contact and his reports, they would chatter from time to time. The report stated that it should be the time for them to patrol.

It was the afternoon, and he was in the bunk of the barracks. The kitten had been dumped outside, for it may otherwise touch the gun parts in the room, and so it was clawing away at the door.

*“But what if they are to attack at that moment?”*

Lena pouted in response. One had to wonder if she was too serious, or if she was inflexible.

“We’ll figure out something.”

*“Also, it is unreasonable to have a party while a war is going on.”*

“There’s probably a certain zone in the middle of battle. But anything within the <Grand Mur> won’t affect the frontlines.”

He pushed the cam pin down, removed the bolt from the carrier group, and put it on a laid out cloth. An assault rifle would do almost no damage to the <Legion>, but it certainly did not mean that it was useless. It would be the only reliable thing as a last resort, and thus, daily maintenance was necessary.

“I do think it is fine for you to participate. While I’m grateful that you are able to help analyse the enemy, this isn’t something worth taking up your personal time.”

Lena suddenly went silent once he said that,

*“Am I doing something unnecessary...?”*

“No, you have been of great help.”

He was stating the truth. He would never waste his time on a useless Handler trying to satisfy himself.

“Besides, we know the frontlines, that’s all. It is beneficial to have an officer who had been military trained analyze the greater scope.”

*“...Thank goodness”*

“But there is no need to devote your all into this.”

Shinn could practically see Lena purse her lips unhappily, he took out the extractor pin, and while doing so, replied in a flat tone,

“If you get too involved in the battlefield, you will end up like us.”

Lena sighed at Shinn’s words, unsure if he was joking or sincere. She had no intention to be funny.

“You do like to joke around from time to time, Captain Nouzen... understood. I shall try to enjoy the boring party, or the painfulness of wearing high heels and a dress.”

She retorted with this joke, and Shinn seemed to chuckle.

*“The anniversary festival of the Revolution, you say? I do remember such an event.”*

“You do?”

Shinn paused.

*“...I remember there are fireworks, right? At the garden with a fountain, right in front of the palace.”*

Lena lifted her head.

“Yes. At the presidential Lune Palace in the first legislative zone... did you live in the first zone before?”

The first zone contained the posh residential areas that existed since the Imperial era, and most of the residents there were descended from families who lived there back then... the Albas, who used to be royalty, took up the majority, and even nine years ago, it was rare to see Colorate there.

*I might have met him before, she thought, and there was some sadness arising in her heart.*

*"I don't really remember, but I guess that's right. I think I went with my family... back then, my brother held my hand."*

Ah, Lena shriveled back. She messed up again.

"My apologies."

"...Why apologize?"

"I really am insensitive. Back then too... I mentioned your brother and parents..."

"Ahh."

Lena was dejected, and Shinn's tone was as blase and aloof as usual.

*"It's fine. I've pretty much forgotten about them."*

"Eh?"

*"I don't really remember my family. I can recall a few things here and there, but I've mostly forgotten their appearances and voices."*

"..."

Lena did not think Shinn was being deliberately insensitive.

He was probably so young when he bade farewell to his family. After that, he spent another five years fighting for his life.

In the chaotic battlefield, it might be expected of him to forget precious memories.

At that moment, she seemed to visualize a lonely child standing in the middle of a battlefield of ruins, not knowing where he should return to.

"—He said that he had to make it back alive, return to you."

Lena tried to convey those words as accurately as possible, as she recalled what Ray said, and his appearance back when he said that.

The Para-RAID transferred the voice through the shared consciousness, and

also the emotions of a face-to-face conversation.

She hoped to pass on her feelings to him. Ray might be gone from Shinn's memories, but Lena still remembered him. She could still visualize his silhouette, words, and kind heart.

"Obviously he does miss you, saying that 'You probably gave up.' I can feel that he treated you as important family. Your brother really wanted to return back to you."

*".....Let's hope so."*

He answered after this long silence, faltering in a way that was not easily noticed. It seemed while he did hope so, he thoroughly understood that the wish could no longer be granted.

"Captain...?"

Shinn did not answer. Lena realized it was not a topic she should be touching on, and did not say anything. The soft tapping of metal were the only thing heard from time to time in this silence.

And once she heard this distinctive, louder sound, Lena tilted her head. That was...

"Captain, are you cleaning a rifle now?"

Shinn paused.

*"...Yes."*

"It should be patrol time at this point, no?"

The latter did not answer.

No wonder there was nothing important in the patrol reports. So Lena sighed.

However, Squad Spearhead's actions were exceptionally fast, and one had to wonder if they could detect the <Legion> without the use of a radar. She had yet to inquire about this.

"Since you have determined that there is no need for that, I suppose there is no need to... and as for the rifle."

Officially, Eighty Sixers were forbidden from wielding rifles.

“You have determined that there is a need to use that. I will not say anything much, but please follow through with the required maintenance.”

*“...My apologies.”*

Lena heard some confusion in the voice, and blinked her eyes.

“Erm, did I say anything weird?”

*“No... I thought you would be fuming.”*

He was surprised after all. Lena was startled.

Since the moment she took command, she had demanded that he was to submit detailed, timely reports, and often bemoaned her colleagues at the National Military Headquarters for being so lax and unruly.

“I... will not be so rigid about meaningless rules and regulations. I repeat, I shall respect your decision if you have decided whether it will be beneficial to combat.”

*Besides, I am not the one fighting. I have no right to tell them off here.*

She had this fleeting thought, and shook her head, diverting from the topic.

“There is a need to carefully maintain the weapons at hand for the battlefield. For us here, we found the assault rifles manufactured by the Republic to be too heavy, and nobody actually uses them, not even in training.”

The Republic’s Army required massive caliber bullets due to the firepower needed to combat armored forces. Thus, the guns models were all heavy, made with sturdy metals.

However, Shinn was taken aback.

*“Heavy? You said the gun is heavy?”*

Lena was initially taken aback by his extremely perplexed voice, and then she understood.

*Yes, he is a boy. That weight is not a bother to him...*

And the moment she understood this, she felt strangely flustered.

Speaking of which, she had never spoken to a boy of her age for such a long

time.

*“...Major?”*

The Para-RAID could convey the emotions of a face-to-face conversation. Shinn probably could sense Lena blushing.

*“I-It is nothing. Erm.”*

Suddenly, the mood on the other end changed.

There was no sound, but Lena could sense Shinn standing up, looking afar.

*“...Captain Nouzen?”*

*“Please prepare to take command.”*

She had a look at her intel terminal which showed no alert. However, Shinn sounded convinced.

*“The <Legion> is coming.”*

Shinn had already been synchronized with Lena, so Lena participated in this squad briefing.

Once she heard the explanation on various aspects, including enemy numbers, formations, and attack paths, *Did they create a strategy with so much information at hand?* she was left dumbfounded, and, at the same time, she proposed a strategy for this operation. Once this strategy was made, the briefing ended, and the operation began.

*“The main enemy forces are composed only of Grauwolfs.”*

All units were lying in ambush. Lena compared the information she had obtained from the frontline scouts with the radar signals and the battle records; she made a deduction with regards to the vague enemy composition.

*“Considering the production and maintenance rates, the Löwes destroyed in the last battle may not have been all rebuilt. It is hard to imagine the enemy having the Stier lead the charge.”*

The Stier had no mobility, and practically no armor. It was a unit typically used for ambush. Due to their resemblance to the Löwes, they were often mistaken

for the latter when they were first introduced, and the humans managed to fight them off..

“While the “Juggernaut’s” grenades are of no effect against the Löwe, the lighter armor of the Grauwolf will mean that the support fire of the Scorpions will be limited in effectiveness. I think that if we eliminate the Ameise first, they should be of no threat.”

*“Werewolf to all hands. Confirmed. Exactly as the Major had guessed.”*

Speaking up was Raiden, who went forth to scout. He sounded impressed, and stunned.

*“But seriously... you’re talking about talking about production and maintenance rates? Did you get any proper sleep?”*

Shinn suddenly spoke up.

*“Major, please switch off the Para-RAID this time.”*

“Eh?”

*“A chaotic battlefield is inevitable, especially since we are going to be fighting several Grauwolf. There are too many enemies... it will be dangerous to remain synchronized with me.”*

While Shinn had spoken in fluent Republican, Lena did not comprehend. *What, did he just say?*

***Many black sheep?***

*“If you want to hear me out, I’ll explain to you once this battle ends. Please break off now.”*

The skirmish was about to start, and it was understandable that he did not have the time to explain. However, Lena was unhappy about this arrangement.

“You have not disconnected with the other squadmates, am I right? The Eintagsfliege are still around, and wireless communications may fail. I will not disconnect.”

She refused to do so. Shinn probably had some words to say, but he swallowed his words once he saw the approaching <Legion>.



“Hii—?”

She felt her hair stand on end.

She covered her ears with both hands, but it was pointless as the voice came from the the Para-RAID. The dying child calling for his mother seeped in like the tide. The intelligible yell swarmed upon her consciousness like a landslide, repeating itself over and over again. The blunt, loud explosion cut off the voice calling for the mother, and similar voices quickly echoed

*“Save me save me save me save me save me save me save me save me save me save me.”*

*“It’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot it’s hot.”*

*“No... no... no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no.”*

*“Mama, mama, mama, mama, mama mama mama mama mama mama mama mama mama.”*

*“I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die I don’t want to die I don’t want to die I don’t want to die I don’t want to die.”*

“N-No... Noooooo...!”

Lots of dying voices swirled like a vortex, silently devouring all shreds of rationality and thought. Amongst them, Shinn’s voice rang.

*“Major! Disconnect now! Major Millize!”*

The usually poised boy showed a tinge of rare anxiety in his call, but he was unable to reach the ears of the panicked Lena. She covered her ears in pain, shrivelled up with an urge to run away, and let out a hoarse cry. However, she was losing her last shred of sanity amidst the endless waves of dying groans—

*“Tch!”*

Shinn clicked his tongue and disconnected. The dying voices vanished.

“.....Ah...”

She stiffly lifted her head, and gingerly loosened her hands... she could hear nothing. She had disconnected with all the Processors.

In her fear and frantic breathing, she slowly widened her eyes, and stared at the dim control room, and found herself fallen off the child, tumbled upon the floor.

*...What, was that...?*

It was not the voices of the synchronized Processors. None of those voices belonged to them, and they were much more in numbers.

And amongst the endless groans, she could identify one.

*—I don't want to die.*

*"...Kirschblüte... Kaie...?"*

Shinn disconnected with Lena, and was fighting a large swarm of "black sheep." He narrowed his eyes as the dying voices saturated his ears. Most of the enemies were Grauwolf, and the high frequency blades they had could cut armor like water. Thus, he was late to disconnect as he had to deal with the incoming slashes.

Screams, pants, groans, roars. All kinds of voices echoed, deafening when they were up close, so much that he could identify a voice. Seo could hear one of them through his Para-RAID, and groaned,

*"Damn it...! That was, Kaie...!"*

Shinn could sense a few gasp. The communicator was filled with commotion.

*"Kaie...!? Was she taken away...!?"*

*"Damn it... Angel should dealt with it already...!"*

He ignored the furious yells of his squadmates and identified the location of "Kaie." Unlike the others hearing this through the Para-RAID, only Shinn could do so.

He could easily identify where she was, without having to focus his hearing. The precision of his hearing was superhuman, one capable to finding a needle in a haystack.

And closest to her was — Krena.

“Gunslinger, two o’clock, distance eight hundred. Leader of the squad with fifteen units, the Grauwolf second from right.”

*“...Understood.”*

After a cannon shot, the voice of a soul that had lingered even after death, Kaie’s begging voice to live finally vanished, as the destruction brought it back to the gates of Hades.

Shinn stood still in the mind-crushing vortex of grudges and screams, sighing in pity,

“A battle to mourn the dead, huh.”

The souls of the Dead would never return until they were destroyed.

They seemed to yearn a return to the solace they deserved.

*That Handler girl probably will never contact us again...* Shinn momentarily felt some lingering regret, and frowned.

†

By the time she summoned the courage to synchronize again, the sun had already set.

Whenever she had the urge to do so, her heart would be filled with lots of fear, so much that she was nauseous. She could only pause, ease herself, and try again, rinse and repeat. Only when nightfall arrived, when it was lights out on the frontlines, did she finally send a transmission.

*Will I be causing him an inconvenience at such a late moment?* she thought, and she exerted a lot of effort into shooing those thoughts away. If she left it for tomorrow, she might dither upon the same excuses again, and would have no courage to synchronize again.

She took a deep breath to restrain her frantic breathing, and activated the

Para-RAID. Luckily, he was not asleep, and she managed to get through. There was only one person on the other end.

He was the one who said to disconnect, and warned her not to remain synchronized. Naturally, he was the one she had to ask.

“...Captain Nouzen.”

She sensed Shinn widen his eyes.

“This is Millize. Erm, is it okay to talk now?”

There was a short pause.

And for some reason, she could hear some water during this time, as though rain was falling.

*“...I’m in the showers.”*

“Eh!?”

It was the first time Lena had heard herself give such a startled squeak.

Her ears were completely red, and while she wanted to reply, she was tongue-tied, and she had ceased all thought. She was left terrified in a different way as compared to earlier in the day, and finally eked out some words.

“So-Sorry, erm, it is late now... I shall disconnect immediately.”

“No.”

Shinn’s voice was as poised as ever, and it was a little irritating to Lena.

*“I don’t mind, personally, and I’m going to sleep once I’m done showering. If there is anything, please ask. Also, please don’t mind.”*

“Is..... that so? Then...”

Even so, Lena’s father died early, and she had no brothers, and no lover. This predicament was a little too stimulating for her. She spoke up, sensing that her face was still sizzling.

“Ah... yeah, erm, how did the battle go? Are there any casualties? Or, KIA...?”

*“Not at all... is that all you want to ask about?”*

“Because...”

No matter how sharp they were, there was no assurance that they could return from the battle against the <Legion> in one piece.

Furthermore, they fought in the echoes of screams, she was utterly terrified to imagine that the squad had been wiped out, that nobody would be connected if she tried to synchronize.

“Captain... the voice I heard during today’s battle was...”

Once she said that, she felt a chill in her body.

There was some noise in the background of the transmission, as per usual. It sounded like the rustling of a deep forest, or chatter in the distance.

And at this point, the distant chatter resembled a collectiveness of countless voices of the dying.

She finally understood why Shinn was called the “Undertaker,” why the prior Handlers were utterly terrified of him.

The reason was those voices.

“What, were those...?”

“...”

The sound of water alone echoed in the pause.

*“In the past, I had died.”*

From out of nowhere, there was a blunt pain coming from her neck, as though she was being brutally strangled.

The pain did not come from Lena’s own senses, but through the Para-RAID... in other words, it was Shinn’s.

“Rather, I’ll say that I died once back then. So I can hear the voices of the souls who died and yet remain in this world... because I’m like them.”

“...Ghosts.”

Suddenly, she recalled the accident Arnett’s father went through.

He pushed the nervous activation rate of the Para-RAID to the theoretical maximum value, and fell into the consciousness of the world itself, never able

to return

If that was the case, if all the dead must return to the deep bottomless world.

Then those on the brink of death, who nearly fell into the abyss — might be able to establish contact with the other things inside that abyss, as easily as using a Para-RAID. For example, the ghosts that would never perish for eternity, that had fallen into the bottom of the abyss after death, and residing in the bodies that were still struggling to climb out.

But that was...

“The <Legion> ...is it not?”

She heard the sounds when the Grauwolfs were right in front of Shinn. Before the battle, Shinn had said,

*“They, the <Legion>, are ghosts. They lost their purpose as weapons when the Empire was destroyed, had no mission, and no need to fulfill their obligations, but they continue to linger on this world... they are the ghosts belonging to the military of a destroyed country.”*

“...Wait, so the reason you are able to detect the <Legion> is...”

*“Yes, I can hear their voices. As long as they come close, I can hear them, even when I’m sleeping.”*

“Please wait...!”

Lena groaned. He had just mentioned something she could not simply pass off.

He could hear them while they approached? Even though the nearest enemy base was some distance away from theirs? He could tell how many of the <Legion> was moving within that range!?

The voices of the Dead were like footsteps far away, the rustling of the leaves.

As the Para-RAID was set to the minimum value, she could only hear the voice of the one she was synchronized with, the sounds within arms’ length of the synchronized, and loud sounds.

To Lena, whenever she synchronized with Shinn, the background noise simply

seemed jumbled to her... but what did they seem like to Shinn?

“How many voices can you hear now, Shinn? How large is the range, and how much...”

*“I can’t say the exact distance, but I can hear all <Legion> inside the former lands of the Republic... I can hear some voices further away, but I can’t figure them all out.”*

That world was beyond imagination.

Even if a single voice was a murmur, including the total numbers of the <Legion>.

He had been listening to them the entire time, even in sleep.

“Do you not... find it a burden?”

*“Got used to it. It’s been a long while.”*

“When, did it start...?”

He did not respond, so Lena went to the next question,

“I heard the voice of Lieutenant Kaie Tanya. Is that because, she... has become a ghost too?”

There was some bewilderment in her words. This fact remained so surreal to her.

A short pause. The sound of water stopped, and it seemed he was wiping away the water on his hair.

*“The Republic government determined that this war will end in another two years at most, right?”*

“Eh, yes... how did you know?”

Lena was a little perturbed with regards to the sudden change in conversation, but she nodded anyway. The government did not reveal this, in order to prevent the Processors from having hope.

*“Heard it from Seo. He heard it from his old Captain... the CPU of the <Legion> was designed to have a limited lifespan, with less than two years left. Am I right?”*

“...Yes.”

The Central Nervous System of the <Legion> consisted of fluid nanomachines that mimicked the nervous system of a mammal, and granted the processor capability similar to the neural system of a large mammal. However, in the blueprints maintaining these structures, there was an imposed time limit and self-destruction process that could not be removed.

*“Once I heard Seo’s explanation, I got it. The <Legion> sounded like machines, with no rhyme or rhythm. Then, one day, human voices entered. I can guess what happened, but I didn’t know why they did so.”*

There then came the sound of hair being dried in a crude manner a female could not imagine, followed by the soft sound of cloth rubbing. It was obvious the clothes were of low quality, rough and stiff.

*“If the Central Nervous System blueprints are gone, they can simply get a replacement... and the thing that can be used to replace it is right next to them.”*

“...Is that?”

*“Yes. The Central Nervous System that is exceptionally advanced even amongst mammals. The human brain.”*

A moment of thought was enough to leave Lena revolted. This was far beyond grotesque; it was an outright desecration of human dignity. In contrast, Shinn remained stoic as per usual.

*“My guess is that it is a replica of a human brain. The brain of a dead person will rot quickly, and there aren’t many well preserved corpses that can be used, let alone those without damaged brains. In fact, we have encountered <Legion> with the same voices at least once. I am guessing Kaie should be elsewhere.”*

The girl was no longer alive, her plea remained sealed in a machine, repeating itself like a music box.

*“So while I say they are ghosts, they are different from the norm. I would say that they are more of a residue instead. They do not have the will of humans, and no intention to communicate. What they replicated is the brain of the Dead, at their last moments. Their thoughts are just a replay of that moment, and they became ghosts residing amongst the <Legion>.”*

“...Black sheep...”

*“Yeah, the Black Sheep, mutated ones possessed by ghosts, are mixed amongst the White Sheep called the <Legion>. Right now, the black sheep have far surpassed the white sheep in numbers.”*

Even though they started to rot from the moment of death, the human brain remained the most advanced amongst mammals. The Central Nervous System of the <Legion> mimicked the human brain, and surely its capabilities were superior. Though the blueprints had failed over and over again, the incessant voices of the Dead showed that the mutated Black sheep were multiplying faster in numbers.

She had a feeling Shinn was pitying the <Legion>, for they had lost their hometown, the reason to keep fighting, and the reason to exist, yet they were mechanical ghosts, scavenging corpses, always fighting as defined in their parameters.

*“...I can somewhat understand the reason why they keep attacking the Republic.”*

“Eh?”

*“They are ghosts. They should be gone, yet they remain, until they are wiped out. I suppose they want to go back, and that’s why they are attacking those that are also ghosts before them, wanting to bring them along.”*

“Ghosts...?”

Who was he referring to?

Was he referring to the Eighty Sixers who remained alive, but were not deemed human, and no different from the dead in society?

***“The Republic died nine years ago, right... is it anywhere to be found now, the spirit of the five colored flag that formed the basis of the country?”***

The calm words from Shinn contained his scathing criticism that hit too close to home.

Freedom, equality, fraternity, justice, and purity. For no rational reason, they degraded people into classes, and had no shame or pity in having millions lose

their lives... this country had long lost its right to exalt its values.

The Republic delivered its own demise. It died off completely nine years ago, the moment some of its people persecuted different groups.

Perhaps Shinn could hear the voice of that which had died, and yet lingered, the voice of the massive ghost called the Republic.

Lena had nothing to say about that. After a short pause, Shinn suddenly spoke up, his voice was stoic as ever, narrating what appeared to be a well established fact.

*“Major, you will lose this war.”*

He did not say “we.”

“What do you mean?”

*“I’m saying that the <Legion> might not cease function just because the Central Nervous System is disabled. In fact, I can sense that their numbers aren’t decreasing, but increasing... then, what about the Eighty Sixers? How many are there left?”*

Lena could not answer. She did not know. The Republic never counted them.

“I’m guessing the only ones left are two, three years younger than us. Once they were detained in the Concentration Camps, the Eighty Sixers never reproduced, and half of the babies back then died.”

The adult Eighty Sixers who were detained were practically wiped out two years into the war. None of the recruited soldiers survived, and the others who were mobilized to build the <Grand Mur> were put through harsh conditions, made to do tough manual labor meant to wear them out, and they perished as a result. The elderly and sickly, of no particular use to anyone, passed away during these nine years.

“...Why, the babies too...?”

*“Are you asking about the mortality rates of the babies, in an environment bereft of proper medical services? ...In the Concentration Camp I was in, none of*

*the babies survived the first Winter, and I'm guessing it's the same for the other Camps. Of the surviving babies, half of them were sold."*

"Sold?"

*"Yeah, by some soldiers and the Eighty Sixers for money. I don't know if they're sold in whole or in parts though."*

Only a tad later did Lena understand the significance. She felt her face pale.

In other words, in this Republic, there were people who derided Eighty Sixers as pigs, who did whatever they wanted to the children of those pigs, and used their organs to extend their lives.

All that was left were prepubescent teenagers, and they were sent to the battlefield, until they could no longer fight.

*"The <Legion> will not drop in numbers, but the Eighty Sixers will die off. At that point, will you be able to fight? You don't know how to fight, don't understand battle formations. Without a second thought, you had the Eighty Sixers conscripted and pay for the military spending Do you think you will be able to arm yourselves and fight?"*

*Probably not*, he sneered.

He was not mocking those who were inflicting the pain on others and were going to suffer from the same predicament; he was mocking those who only cared about the benefits before them, ignoring reality, residing in the brief, fleeting solace, and had degraded into backward creatures without ability to protect themselves.

*"If nobody is willing to volunteer, forced conscription is the only way out. Under the establishment of the Republic, this will only be done at the last moment, when danger is imminent. By then, it will be too late... a flaw of modern Republicanism is that decisions can't be made unless it is a matter of life and death."*

Lena kept imagining a bright, realistic image of defeat as Shinn said this, and frantically shook her head to shake off the notion, trying to deny it. It was not because she had a reason to refute, but that she could not accept the sudden, unimaginable possibility that her country would be wiped out in a mere few

years.

“B-But, the <Legion> detected are decreasing in numbers! It is already half compared to years before...”

*“That is the number that can be detected within range, right? Due to the 24/7 electronic jamming from the Eintagsfliege, everything from the Contested Area to deep within <Legion> Territory can’t be detected... it’s true that the <Legion> numbers on the frontlines have been dropping, but that’s because they aren’t sending any more than the necessary numbers needed. On one end, they continue to battle in a war of attrition, while on the other, they reserve more forces at the back, and are increasing in number.”*

There was only one objective.

To preserve strength, cease the war of attrition that wore them down, and launch a full scale attack, breaching the defenses of the Republic in one fell swoop.

“But the <Legion> does not have such intelligence to make such decisions.”

*“It didn’t. This is another reason for your defeat.”*

Unlike the pathetic response from Lena, Shinn’s voice remained calm and nonchalant,

*“There are few corpses with their heads unblemished, but on this battlefield, there are millions of corpses that were not taken back, and it is possible to find a head that has not rotted... for humans, it’s easy to make the decision to build up the forces when fighting against an enemy that can’t be defeated otherwise. So, assuming that there are <Legion> units with intelligence on par with humans, what happens next?”*

“...!”

Black sheep. The <Legion> that had duplicated the human brain structure. Even after rotting, they would possess better capabilities than the Central Nervous System.

Thus, what if they found a way to be immortal, that they could find a human brain that had yet to rot?

*“We call such <Legion> units the <Shepherds>. The <Legion> are soldiers that are tasked to action, but the <Shepherds> are the commanders leading these dead souls. At this point, we’ve fought a few enemy squads led by <Shepherds>, and they’re a lot more vicious than those without command. There’s no comparison.”*

“Wait. You mean those machines aren’t just an assumption, that they really exist? Can you—”

*“I can hear them. The voices of these commanders reach from far away, and I can distinguish them easily even amongst enemy units. There are dozens of commanders along all the battlefields, and in our First BattleZone — there is one.”*

At that moment, Shinn’s voice got chillingly cold, like a blade reflecting the moonlight, giving off a sharp, dangerous, maniacal presence similar to when he mentioned his dead brother.

She was terrified.

The Republic would be wiped out, because of its incompetence and foolishness, because millions were sent to the battlefield and perished, because their ankles were grabbed by the dead souls of the Eighty Sixers they were too lazy to bury.

“B-But.”

Suddenly, Lena spoke up, as though she thought of something.

“That is... only if all of you die out, right?”

Shinn blinked.

“Yes.”

“Then, if we can beat the <Legion> before then, it will not happen. If it is you... Squad Spearhead who can figure out where the <Legion> are hiding and attacking, this is not impossible, no?”

If it was them, who could fight off the harshest of the <Legion> assaults.

*“With enough manpower, equipment, and time, there should be a possibility. All forms of warfare require such conditions.”*

“Then, let us beat them. I too—”

She was about to say *I will fight*, but corrected herself as she felt it was arrogant of her.

“I shall do my best. Whether it is to analyze the enemy, formulate strategies, anything I can do, I shall... that should be the same for the other battlefronts.”

Surely, if she could obtain detailed enemy intel and plan the basic countermeasures, it would be beneficial to the Republic. With this logic, sharing this experience with others was not a difficult task to accomplish.

“Captain Nouzen, your service will end this year, right? Let us... live until then.”

Shinn showed a wry smile, his voice filled with a tinge of kindness.

“...I suppose.”

After disconnecting with Lena, Shinn returned to his room in the barracks, lights out and all quiet.

He entered his dim room, and the glass window reflected his appearance under the moonlight of the full moon.

The blue scarf remained on his neck even in battle, but he would remove it whenever he slept. He intended to sleep once he was done with the shower, and thus, at the collar of his army clothes that were hastily worn over the undershirt, the familiar blue was nowhere to be seen.

Having lived a life of battle, each one a matter of life and death, his slender body was honed to be as strong and fast as a leopard. On this elastic neck, there was a dark red ring mark.

The nerve-wracking scar was not a straight line, but jagged. It was as though his head was once severed, and then sewed back on.

He then lifted a hand, gently caressing the scar on his neck.

## Chapter 6 - The Headless Knight II

It was half a year after he was conscripted when Raiden encountered that Death God, when he was assigned to the latter's squadron.

The last of his friends, who were conscripted at the same time, died in another squad just the day before he was reassigned.

Before conscription, he had remained hidden in Area Eighty Five.

Hiding him was an old Alba lady who had once managed a private boarding school.

She hid all the Eighty Sixer children she could, whether they were her students or just children living nearby, and had them hidden in the dormitories.

After five years, someone spilled the beans. The government sent soldiers to escort these children to the Concentration Camps. The old lady did her best to obstruct them, pleading with the conscience and justice of humanity, only to be answered with mocking and humiliation.

The soldiers had them board a truck used to transport livestock and drove off as though nothing had happened. The old lady gave chase, lashing out until the very end.

She had never uttered a single bad word. Whenever Raiden and the others cussed, without fail, she would become utterly, flusteredly furious.

But it was this old woman whose face was in tears, contorted in rage as she yelled,

"Go to hell, you scumbags!!!"

That harsh yell, along with the sight of her sprawled on the road, wailing away, remained fresh in Raiden's mind.

The one they called the "Death God" was his squad leader, of the same age.

Given Raiden's prior experience, it was strange to see him extremely lax.

He never organized patrols and would search around the dumps alone even though there might be <Legion> lurking around, and even though the radar did not capture any signal, he would order them to sortie. He was able to give commands with stunning precision every time, but that languid demeanour of his seemed so suicidal to Raiden.

Raiden had had enough of it.

While his friends who were conscripted had all died out, they did fight until the very end. The old lady risked being beaten to death as she did her best to protect Raiden and the kids.

But this guy before him did not seem to care about anything, whether it was Raiden's life or the others'.

Half a month after he joined, his patience had reached its limit. On that day, the leader never ordered a patrol, as usual, and he started an argument that quickly escalated into a scuffle.

Given their difference in physique, he was able to hold back his punch, but he sent the tall and scrawny Shinn flying. He stared down the latter who was on the dusty floor, and hollered, "Stop fooling around!" However, the latter merely looked back up with those crimson red eyes, unfazed.

"...It's my fault for not explaining, I guess."

Shinn spat out blood as he stood up. His movements remained nimble, and it seemed he was not grievously hurt.

"But given my prior experience, nobody believes me until they actually hear it. I just don't want to waste my time."

"Huh? What are you saying?"

"I'll explain when that happens... also."

Before he finished his words, Shinn slammed a fist in Raiden's face.

The scrawny body was nimble in movement, and delivered a stunning amount of force. The movement of his body and the delivery of force was without any

unnecessary movement, and Raiden was sent sprawling to the ground, his mind shaking.

“This doesn’t mean I’m willing to get hit. I won’t hold back; you want to fight, I’ll take you on.”

The brat had such unabashed arrogance. Raiden darted forth with all his might.

In conclusion, Raiden lost. He was beaten so badly that he was unable to fight back. Shinn had an extra year’s worth of combat experience, was more proficient in enacting violence, and knew how to use it.

Though peeved, Raiden had to admit Shinn had some ability, and had a slight change in impression. *“You think you’re some manga protagonist or something? Don’t you feel ashamed?”* Seo retorted when he heard of this incident, but for Raiden, Seo never understood what he was getting at. Shinn, the other party involved, was holding in his laughter, but Raiden did not care about what that idiot was thinking.

The day after the scuffle, “You’d better explain this,” he told Shinn while enduring the pain in his mouth.

And in the following battle, he heard the bone-chilling screams of the ghosts.

At that moment, Raiden understood why there was no need to patrol... why Shinn had a poise that was far beyond his years.

†

Once the lights were out, the barracks of Spearhead Squadron went silent. Raiden laid the bunk in his room, his eyes still open as he suddenly heard some footsteps.

He glanced at the room next to his, the door slightly ajar. In the dim room, Shinn was standing before the window that was whitened by the moonlight.

“Who were you talking to?”

He seemed to have heard Shinn talking in the showers downstairs and in the changing room by the side.

“Yep.” Shinn merely glanced towards him, nodding. The bright red eyes were encased in ice, giving a poise unbefitting his age, a callousness that would never falter.

“It’s the Major. She synchronized with me. Had a few words.”

“..Ah, she actually contacted you. That Princess really has some guts.”

Raiden was a little impressed. Of the Handlers before her, every single one who heard those voices never contacted them again.

His eyes were staring at bare neck, the red scar looping around it.

He heard Shinn mention how the terrifying scar, akin to a beheading, came about. He knew Shinn could hear the voices of the dead, because of that scar.

The night remained quiet. For Raiden, at least.

However, Shinn... a compatriot of his, had obtained the supernatural ability to hear the voices of the ghosts that would never vanish. How much anguish and lament could he hear?

There was no one who could remain perfectly sane after hearing these voices all the time. The unflinching, poised Death God was probably a result of repressed emotions in his heart, along with his tormented mind.

This Death God stared at Raiden, his bloody red eyes seemingly able to freeze everything within sight.

Raiden knew that Shinn’s heart was fixed upon the other end of the long battlefield, having spotted the head he was looking for.

“Gotta sleep. We’ll leave the talk for tomorrow.”

“...Ahh, sorry.”

The door was barely closed as footsteps returned to the next room, and the pipe bed rattled. Shinn stood before the window that was shrouded in moonlight, unflinching as he stared at the distant battlefield.

He pricked his ears, and could hear the calls of countless ghosts, as plentiful as the countless stars, filling the darkness of the night. They included groans,

yells, laments, screams, and monotonous murmurs that could not be heard. However, he was focused on a voice that came through everything else, from the distant place he could not spot.

It was eight years ago when he heard that person say this with the same voice.

Back then, that was the sentence he heard.

Every night, whenever he heard this voice, he could remember, never to forget.

A shadow that leapt at him.

The force and pressure choking his neck, trying to crush everything.

Glaring at him were the black eyes behind the lens, filled with utter malice.

Sin. This is your name. How fitting.

It's all your fault. Everything is all your fault.

The same voice was calling for him from afar. Five years ago, after he had died at an abandoned dump somewhere along the eastern battlefield, this voice had been calling for him ever since then.

Shinn reached his hand out, touching the frosty glass window, and muttered despite knowing the other party could not hear him,

"I'm going over to you — brother."

## Chapter 7 - Fucking Glory to Spearhead Squadron

On that day, there were many “Black Sheep” who battled, and after the battle ended, Lena gingerly heaved a sigh, trying her best to endure the disgust she felt.

Her Para-RAID was not disconnected, and Krena on the other side suddenly spoke up. The battle had ended, and the other Processors had already disconnected, except for her.

*“If you can’t take it, you can disconnect, you know.”*

Her voice was so nonchalant, devoid of worry.

*“It doesn’t matter whether you’re watching over us. Nothing will happen even without you managing us. Nobody can see you anyway, and it’s distracting to see you suffer when we’re in battle, you understand?”*

Lena could not bring herself to be angry, because she was right. However, Lena was pleased to receive these words.

Then, she suddenly thought of something, and asked,

*“Is this not painful, for you and everyone else...?”*

There was no way Krena and the others could disconnect the Para-RAID just because they were suffering. Shinn’s ability could precisely detect the location and number of the enemy, and it was a valuable information trove in battle.

Krena then shrugged.

*“Nothing, we’re used to it. Even without Shinn, us Processors are already way too used to hearing the screams of those meeting their demise.”*

Her tone was as calm as ever, but Lena could sense a little falter. It was not an emotion of fear, rage, regret, or remorse, but an emotion that was darker than that.

*“Being blown to bits along with the unit is a good way to die. Everyone’s used*

*to seeing limbs getting blown up, brains shredded, bodies burned, organs spilling out from ruptured bellies, people in such pain that it's better to die than to survive, screams, until they all die. Compared to that, the voices aren't much."*

Behind the calm voice were the tears and bitterness that were endured.

Lena could sense the girl at the distant battlefield pursing her lips. Her tightly clenched teeth were clattering.

*"It's the same here, this 'First Battle Zone...' one or two deaths isn't strange for us."*

*"...Yes."*

Of the twenty four initial members, one had died two days ago, and there were thirteen of them left.

Raiden dumped the broken radio that could never be repaired into the reclamation furnace of the automated factory.

As usual, a few familiar faces were lingering in the room when Lena suddenly connected through Para-RAID.

*"Good evening."*

Once she greeted them, they responded,

*"Copy that, Major... just a few bastards here, so bear with it."*

The girl on the other end seemed to have tilted her head in confusion.

It was natural that she would feel this way. Every night, the first to respond would always be Shinn, and not Raiden.

*"...Erm, is there anything wrong with Captain Nouzen?"*

Seo, holding the sketch book, snorted,

*"Don't you find it a bother, Major Millize? You know our ranks are all just for show, right?"*

The commander of the squadron was ranked Captain, followed by the vice commander and squad leaders, and finally the squad members, the latter ranked Warrant Officers. This was only to clearly define a hierarchy within the ranks, and no difference in treatment or authorization was granted. The Processors in this squadron had “Personal Codenames,” and most of them were formerly commanders or vice commander, forcibly demoted from Captain and Lieutenant to 2nd Lieutenant or Warrant Officer.

However, Lena answered with clarity.

Raiden was slightly amused to see the girl become a little more open, as compared to how tentative she was before.

*“Have you not been calling me Major too, Lieutenant Shuga and Second Lieutenant Lica? Is there a problem with me addressing you the same way?”*

*“...You’re right.”*

Seo had nothing to say, and gave a wry smile.

*Lena is fine.* Though she had said so, none of them had referred to her as such. It was likely they realized the barrier between them, and Lena had to address them as her subordinates, in an unacquainted manner.

Though they conversed, they were not at the stage where they could address each other by personal names. If she were to act chummy with them, she would end up highlighting the fact that she was one of the oppressors, and that was a fine line never to be crossed.

*“...Then, erm, what about Captain Nouzen? Did something happen to him during the battle today—?”*

*“Ahh, no.”*

Raiden glanced aside at the wall isolating the neighboring room.

Everyone, other than Krena and Angel, were gathered together on this night, spending time in their own ways. However, they were not gathered in Shinn’s room, but Raiden’s.

The other side of the thin partition was extremely quiet, not a single movement to be heard.

“He’s sleeping. He’s tired.”

Shinn started to feel drowsy when they were having dinner, and he was already sleeping soundly by the time Raiden, who was on duty, was done cleaning up and checked on his room. The kitten next to him was purring unhappily, so Raiden took it out, and laid a blanket over Shinn. It was likely the latter would only wake up the following day.

Over the three years Raiden had known Shinn, such a situation would happen every once in a while. Though he said he was used to it, it was tiring to hear the voices of the <Legion> twenty four hours a day.

Raiden and the others, with their Para-RAIDs set to the minimum, would not hear those voices. Nobody could comprehend what kind of world Shinn was living in. Once, just once, Shinn synchronized with an ex-Handler at the highest setting, and that Handler killed himself. The latter had been deliberately giving wrong intel and commands, letting the Processors die for nothing, and reveled in it, resulting in a rookie, who had just been assigned, to be sacrificed amidst the confusion. Shinn was annoyed by the Handler’s actions, and during the next battle, set the Para-RAID to the maximum level, synchronized only with the Handler. The Handler never synchronized with them again, and the next day, they received a report from a messenger, stating that the Handler had committed suicide.

Shinn was living in a world filled with such voices, and recently, Squad Spearhead had been hard pressed.

*“...I guess everyone, including the Captain, has been increasingly stressed in many ways... never thought we would have KIAs...”*

“...Yeah.”

Lena lamented, and Raiden nodded. Shinn was not the only one, for everyone else had been clearly weary during the recent battles, and were at their limits.

Since the establishment of the squad, there had been eleven KIAs in Spearhead Squadron, almost half of the allotted number. Typically, this Squadron should be considered unable to battle, and had to be restructured. The frequency of the attacks, along with the numbers of the <Legion>, had not changed in the slightest, so every member’s responsibility in battle had

increased. The enemy numbers had been beyond whatever they could handle, and the amounting fatigue resulted in lapses of judgement, and increased the number of casualties.

However, there had been no reinforcements, and even the vacancies of the trio who died in February, including Kujo, had not been replaced. Lena's voice became stiff, as though she was pursing her lips.

*"I will expedite the request, and have the higher-ups prioritize the reinforcements here."*

Haruto gave Raiden a glance, and the latter let out a sigh,

"Ahh... I guess."

*"This Squad is in charge of defending the most critical bases, and has the privilege to be reinforced. I will ask the surrounding squadrons for reinforcements... also, please hang on."*

"...Yeah."

He nodded away in an ambiguous manner, and out of the corner of his eye, he could see Haruto and Seo shrugging.

"...Hey, Angel, I say."

Krena and Angel were the only ones in the showers.

Angel was washing her long silver hair, and Krena was pouring warm water over her head.

"What is it?"

"Shouldn't it be time to tell that girl?"

For some reason, Angel gave Krena an elated look.

"Worried about the Major?"

"Wha."

She frantically shook her head. *What is she saying!?*

"Not at all! Why should I be worried about that girl!? ...It's just that, looking

how, she's not scared of Shinn, I just thought it's fine to tell her, that's all."

Krena pursed her lips, pouting away.

She hated Lena, how the latter was always saying such nauseatingly pretty words. However, Lena never thought of Krena's precious squadmates as monsters, which was not something to take for granted.

"Nobody has said it, I guess. Not Shinn, not Raiden... if we did, that girl would probably never contact us again. It's better for us both."

"I guess... Kaie once said that..."

*You're not a bad person. You shouldn't be caring for us.*

"But it's because of this that Shinn and Raiden haven't said anything. They probably think that saying it will only hurt both sides."

"..."

Kaie was no longer around.

This petite girl was always angsty about her flat body whenever they showered, and always teased by others. Gone was that girl who was as obedient as a kitten, and all their friends who always enthusiastically discussed topics boys should never hear.

At this point, only the two of them remained. Of the six female soldiers in the squadron, only Krena and Angel remained, everyone else had died.

Krena was suddenly reminded of something, and lifted her head towards Angel.

"Hey Angel."

"Wha~tt?"

"...Is it fine?"

Angel's hands stopped washing her hair, and she shrugged.

It had been more than a year since they first met, but it was the first time Angel was showering with her. Before this, Angel never stripped herself before anyone else, not even her female squadmates.

“Yes, I guess it’s fine now. Since there’s only two of us, there’s nothing to hide.”

Her skin remained exceptionally pearly white, even in the steam. There were scars of various sizes all over her body, and in this aspect, she was no different from Krena. However, Angel’s back clearly had some bright scars that obviously were not caused in battle.

Krena could see word-like scars between the gaps of the long hair, and hurriedly looked aside. She could vaguely see the words “Daughter of a Whore.” While Angel was almost a pure-blooded Alba, one of her ancestors had a Celesta bloodline.

“...When he first met me, Daiya, he praised my pretty hair. He knew I had long hair to cover the scars, but he purposely asked if I had long hair because it’s pretty.”

As she said this with a calm tone, Angel finally looked up. The thin lips were trying their best to force a smile as they quivered, acting as though they did not belong to her.

“Even that Daiya is no longer around. So, there’s no need to hide now...”

Krena had assumed Angel was crying, but the latter was not. Angel lifted her damp hair, and looked back at Krena, the kind face displaying the usual, serene smile.

“What about you, Krena? Not going to say it to him?”

Angel never specified whom she was referring to, and did not have to prod. Krena knew very well.

Krena lowered her eyes.

“...Hm. I guess, I don’t have the right to say those words.”

When she was first assigned to his squadron, truth be told, she was terrified.

He was already infamous amongst them. The headless “Death God” with red eyes, ruling over the frontlines of the eastern battle zone.

Most of those with “Personal Codenames” survived by sucking the blood of their deceased comrades, and most of them were malicious. Amongst them

however, Shinn's codename really stood out.

Undertaker, the one who was always closest to death, and yet never could die, always simply burying others, no different from a death god. His codename was the most kindred, yet reviled existence on the battle.

It was said that of his squad, everyone else other than "Werewolf" had died off. Some said that he was a harbinger of death, as his codename implied; others said he sacrificed the lives of his comrades to protect himself.

It was only later on that she learned that, ever since he was conscripted, he was sent to the most turbulent of the areas the whole time.

And during an umpteenth battle.

A landmine unit crept under one of her comrade's unit, and blew it up.

He was grievously hurt, suffering, but nobody else could do anything about it.

Shinn alone quietly knelt by his side. Raiden was about to do so, only to be stopped by Shinn

Krena, standing far away, saw Shinn draw his pistol. Everyone would do so, for self-defense, and also to commit suicide as a last resort.

But on that day, for the first time, she learned of a third use.

*"I know it's difficult for you. Try thinking of some happy things though, anything will do."*

For some reason, the dying person showed a smile. And their lips quivered.

*"Promise me... take me along too, will you...?"*

*"Yeah."*

The dying comrade extended the hand covered in blood and shattered organs, touching Shinn's face. The latter did not blink. As she watched this, Krena felt it was the most sacred, beautiful scene to be seen.

*Our death god*, thus she knew the reason why he was hailed as such by Raiden and the other squadmates who had joined earlier than she did.

For he would always bring them along, he would bear everything, the names of his deceased comrades, their wishes, without exception, and keep going to

the end of the journey.

For the Processors could not enter the grave, destined to be forgotten, never able to know if they could see the sunrise on the following day, and this was an irreplaceable redemption they could never have yearned for.

Truly, from the bottom of her heart, she had fallen for him.

She was truly elated to think that when she were to die one day, he would take her along. She was no longer afraid, and started refining her skills until she was very proficient in marksmanship. If such a thing was to happen again, she could take over, so she thought.

Even though she was fated to die, she wanted to remain by his side for a little longer.

But,

Krena turned off the tap, and looked up. She knew she could not do it. As long as she remained on this battlefield, she could never do so. She could not be like the Death God, able to go to the ends of the Earth while carrying the names and wishes of the comrades she fought alongside.

..

But if that was the case, who would be the one carrying Shinn's wishes...?

+

"Hey, there's one more here, Eighty Sixer."

Once a month, the squadron would receive supplies airlifted from the <Grand Mur>, supplies that could not be provided by the production or automated plants.

Shinn inspected the containers of supplies as listed, and lifted his head once he heard the transporter.

There was a peeved looking officer wearing his military uniform shoddily, stroking his chin as he led two soldiers who were wielding assault rifles, probably for the purpose of intimidation. The soldiers had their rifle safeties on, and the bullets unloaded. Given their close proximity to Shinn, the latter could take them all down before they could fire, but it was pointless to do so, and he

could not be bothered.

“Your Handler (master) requested a delivery of this special ammunition. Hmph, bunch of pigs, to have a human worry so much about you...”

The officer had an anti-blast container behind him, a very bulky item with lots of packaging and a clear label indicating explosives.

Shinn looked on with surprise, and frowned. He did not remember ordering such a thing.

And while Shinn remained silent, the officer suddenly leered. Most Eighty Sixers would subconsciously fight back, but the person before him seemed obedient and unfazed by anything.

“Heard that your Master’s a woman. Hey, how did you pigs get her? Easily duped that naive Princess with just some **sweet talk**?”

Suddenly, Shinn lifted his head at the officer.

“So, do you want me to demonstrate with your wife? She’s feeling lonely this long night, right?”

“You...!”

The furious officer was about to go on a rampage, only to freeze up once he met Shinn in the eyes. The red eyes were as serene as ever, and showed no threatening intention, but for a white swine who lived his life in safety behind the <Grand Mur>, there was no way he was a match for a pig who lived on the battlefield. Shinn deliberately brushed aside the stiffened officer and went to the container. There was this serial number on the checklist, and it contained the signature of Lena he was used to seeing over the past few months.

Beneath it, he spotted a line written on the label.

“Lune Palace...?”

A short moment of thought later, Shinn widened his eyes, having been reminded of something.

†

The party was a social gathering, an activity for many to gain leads, negotiate,

and gather information.

Mostly discussed were elegant, useless matters like the arts, music, or philosophy, but useless matters were useless.

The plaza of the Blanc Neige Palace was filled with glittering lights and the noises of endless desires, and Lena escaped alone to a terrace which the stars shone upon, sighing.

Personally, she disliked such parties, and she was frustrated with most of the males who came to discuss the topic unique to her age group. The Millizes were formerly nobles, investors. There were many aiming for the family's prestige and inheritance.

Luckily, nobody did speak to Lena.

While the black silk evening dress was not exactly a violation of the social dress code, it did clearly resemble mourning clothes when matched with black gems and a white flower. Also, she did not take a drink, and merely stood silently by the flowers at the wall. All the posh ladies there merely ignored her, save for a few troubled looks from time to time. Except for a few words with a stunned Arnett and a troubled Carl-Stahl, there were some ladies who would occasionally praise her (literally and metaphorically) for having a flower on her head that matched the choker RAID device.

It was truly rude of her to do so, but she had no intention to respond.

For Lena, all these acts were simply idle foolishness, whether it was confining oneself by escaping reality, boasting self-pride in the pretentious, confined world, or showing desires of greed and lust. Furthermore, due to her own incompetence, she had caused the deaths of a few Processors...

Suddenly, her RAID device activated.

*"...Major?"*

"Captain Nouzen... what is it now?"

She immediately reached a hand for the device, pressed it, and responded softly. She should not be commanding at this time. Was there a massive battle that the second squadron could not handle...?

However, Shinn's voice remained composed.

*"It's the usual contact time, and you haven't done so, so we contacted you. Did something happen? If it's not convenient, another time is fine..."*

"I am fine. What is it?"

*Now that he mentioned it, it's the usual contact time with Squad Spearhead.* She turned her back on the party, and asked, as the darkness of the New Moon shone upon the garden.

*"'Special ammunition' received. Reporting confirmation."*

Only the stars shone in the night, and a massive firework bloomed.

The flaming reaction resulted in a variety of vibrant colors being scattered in all directions, and they then fluttered like floating snowflakes. Another boom echoed, and another shooting star shot out from the ground, passing through the extinguished snowflakes, and exploded to form another vibrant firework.

Whenever the petals bloomed, there was a raise of innocent, childlike cheers. It was no wonder, for most of them had never witnessed a firework since their childhood. The fleeting moments of fireworks lit their elated eyes, shining upon their dancing shadows.

They could not light them up their the base after all, so the members of the squadron went to a nearby soccer field that had become a dump. Wild grass grew through ground, the soldiers and mechanics scattered in bunches, and the "Juggernauts" waited silently outside.

Fido, which came along with the maintenance crew, was putting the containers on the ground, lit the burner as a replacement for a match, and lit them all one by one.

Shinn was leaning by the "Undertaker," looking up as he watched yet another firework shoot up into the sky.

"—Thank you very much for the fireworks."



Lena heard some cheers from the other members. She realized Shinn might have increased the Para-RAID synchronization rate for her to hear, and felt elated.

“It’s the Anniversary of the Revolution. You did see it along with your brother and parents, right? The others should be the same.”

Whenever the festival approached, the stores in the town would lay out lots of fireworks. So Lena bought a fair bit of them, and had them delivered to the squadron. She issued a few bottles of fine wine to the workers of the logistical branch, did a few things to the label, and stuffed them into the container. Fireworks are flammable, and need to be transported by carrier, while the container used was blast-proof. The checklist had it listed as an explosive.

She never thought she would end up bribing others, and yet was amazed to learn that it was a must if she had to do some unscrupulous things.

*“This is a tradition during the Revolution party, right... can you see fireworks at the Presidential Hall?”*

“Erm.”

From the other side of the terrace, Lena looked over at the presidential residence. It seemed the fireworks had just began, and the multiple colors bloomed in the night sky along with the majestic anthem of the Republic.

She was watching this intricate piece of firework art alone, and gave a forlorn smile.

“I can. But the sky is too bright.”

The party on the streets and the many erratic lights were too bright. The air in the city was polluted, for energy was being wasted without a care. The massive flames that should be showing the dignity of the Republic were blurry due to how dull they were.

Also, nobody else was watching the fireworks, not the ones in the party, nor the pedestrians on the streets. While the customized fireworks made by specialists were a lot prettier than the ones sold in the shops, the people did

not seem to care.

“The fireworks there should be pretty. The sky is dark, and the air is clean and clear.”

In the clear darkness of night, the fireworks were lit in a corner of a distant battlefield, blooming for the onlookers.

*I want to watch this along with them.* Lena swallowed the words she nearly blurted out. She should not be saying such words. If she was willing to, Lena could head to the frontlines to investigate, but Shinn and the others had to remain put, and could not follow Lena and the others back behind the <Grand Mur>. The “together” was simply a short fleeting illusion, not a wish to be hoped for.

After a thought, she said,

“If possible, I want to invite everyone into the First Area to watch the fireworks. You will smile.”

It seemed Shinn gave a wry smile.

*“I don’t recall seeing so many fireworks over there.”*

“So please witness them personally. Once the war ends, once you retire, together.”

Her voice gloomed. The names of Daiya and the other six members who died recently appeared in her mind.

“I do wish Second Lieutenant Iruma and the others would be able to see this... sorry, these words aren’t appropriate now.”

*“No, I do think Daiya and the others would be happy, since we’re remembering the dead with fireworks for the first time. They didn’t like to be all gloomy and sad anyway.”*

Kino and the others are probably happy with this — so Shinn ostensibly quipped with a smile. He was probably showing a larger emotional change compared to usual, and probably moved to some extent.

*“Also, Angel finally cried. She’s always been bottling up her feelings alone, so in this sense, I’m grateful for the fireworks.”*

*“...”*

Daiya and Angel, the two who had remained close to each other for a long time.

*“Warrant Officer Emma probably will never forget this...”*

*“Nobody will. Just as you never forgot about my brother, Major.”*

After a moment of silence, Shinn continued,

*“I’m really glad... because I had already forgotten about my brother.”*

Lena heard the quivering voice, and was left with some disbelief.

It was the first time Shinn had been so frank with her.

*“...Captain Nouzen.”*

*“Can you please not forget about us, Major?”*

Shinn was probably joking. His tone, his voice, was dripped with mischief.

However, as the synchronization rate was set higher than usual, Lena could sense the earnest wishes behind his words.

*If we die, even just for a moment.*

*Please don’t forget about us.*

Lena slowly closed her eyes.

They were so strong, had encountered countless battles, and had survived to this point.

But for the time being, the possibility of death remained within reach, never departing.

*“Of course, I will not... but.”*

She took a deep breath, and clearly answered. This was her duty and responsibility, as Vladlena Millize, Handler of Spearhead Squadron.

*“Not only that, I am not letting another one of you die.”*

Nevertheless,

Lena kept reporting to her superiors, requesting reinforcements an umpteenth time.

But Spearhead Squadron did not have a single soldier added to their file.

†

On that day, during the sortie, four died.

It was a simple assault mission, where they were attacking a frontline base of the <Legion>. This base was a vantage point which enemy forces would attack from. However, it was simply bait, defenceless at first glance, but laid out with traps everywhere.

Shinn had determined the ambush and enemy units locations, and intended to avoid the front, attacking from the flanks.

For some reason, the enemy did not deploy any Eintagsfliege to jam the signals, and Lena did not see any enemy markers on the radar. Before they encountered the enemy however, Shinn and a few others sensed something amiss. *“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,”* so Raiden muttered, stating what a few others had sensed. Perhaps it was an instinct that allowed them to survive through blood and death.

It was not the ability to seek out the enemy by hearing the voices of the ghosts; it was a warrior’s sense of smell.

The radar suddenly blared, and a cannon shot in diagonally from the sky, exploding on the ground.

A few subconsciously managed to evade at that moment due to the instinct they had. The “Griffin” (Chise’s Unit) was a tad late, directly hit and reduced to ashes, while the “Fafnir” (Kino’s unit) was too close to the shot, was hit by the shrapnel, and went silent. The other units were blown aside by the impact, tumbling around. At the same time, the second and third shots came along with explosions.

The computer calculated that the cannon shot was from 120 kilometers north-northeast. Nobody had seen such a blast from such a long range, so abnormally fast too. The initial velocity of the shot was estimated to be at least four thousand meters per second, far beyond the firepower of a single shot.

Even the enemy units in ambush were simply pawns to ensure Spearhead would remain in the blast zone, the latter's attempt to flank the sides considered. The detailed, cruel plan was of a completely different level from the typical <Legion>.

Shinn, ever so alert, quickly discovered and destroyed the Ameise acting as scout, and the long ranged barrage suddenly stopped after ten shots or so (or perhaps there was some malfunction with the new installation). If he had not done so, even these elites would have been wiped out.

And so, after losing four units, they managed to escape and retreat. The four KIA were Chise, Kino, Toma, and Kioto.

There were only nine "Juggernaut" units left.

More than half were killed, and their ranks were in the single digits.

"I..."

Lena was stunned, her voice quivering.

She was parched. She had an ominous imagination, a premonition in her heart that caused her heart to race. She was anxious, at a loss of words.

"I am demanding more soldiers. Right now, immediately. This is really weird —!"

Spearhead Squadron was too weary to be bothered.

They were lacking in numbers, unable to sufficiently rest, and could barely maintain the defense line by asking the surrounding squadrons for assistance or to temporarily take over. The superiors should have known, but they did not do anything. While the requests for reinforcements and resupplies had been easily approved, the request for more soldiers remained ignored. She once went straight to Brigadier General Carl-Stahl directly, at the risk of being accused of nepotism, but never had a single one added to Spearhead.

Shinn tersely said,

*“Major.”*

“I am going to talk to the Brigadier General again. If not, then I will do anything to—”

*“Major Millize.”*

He called out again, and Lena went silent.

*“Everyone, no problems with this?”*

*“...Yeah.”*

Raiden answered for everyone. There was a heavy silence from them.

*“...What...?”*

*“Major, it’s fine. No matter what you do, nothing will change.”*

“Captain Nouzen, what do you mean?”

*“There will be no additional troops. Not even one.”*

*“...Eh.”*

Shinn then quietly noted,

The truth everyone knew, but never informed Lena of.

*“All of us will die. This Squadron is death row for that sole purpose.”*

## Chapter 8 - The Headless Knight III

Before he matured, he could hear the unspoken voices of his mother, brother, and those around him, voices that were filled with much kindness and love.

At that moment, he made up his mind, never to fawn around. That might be the cause of all this.

His father died soon after conscription, and shortly thereafter, his mother was called to the battlefield. Ever since then, Shinn was together with his brother, living in a Church in the corner of a Concentration Camp, raised by a priest.

The Concentration Camp Shinn lived in was a rebuilt village, and the priest was a villager there. An Adularia, the priest was strongly opposed to the directive to detain the Eighty Sixers, and refused to leave the Church and evacuate to the Eighty Five districts, remaining alone in the Concentration Camp that was barricaded by metal fences.

As he was an Alba, he was shunned by the Eighty Sixers, yet he was on good terms with Shinn's parents. When the latter were sent to the battlefield, the priest took care of the brothers, and did his best to raise them.

If not for his actions, Shinn and his brother would not have survived the Concentration Camp. There was lots of outrage against the Albas who decided to forcibly contain them, the Empire that started the war, and the cruel fates that were bound to them, so without the priest's protection, the duo, filled with a significant level of the Empire royalty's noble blood, would easily be a target of rage.

On the night before Shinn turned eight, they received news that their mother had died in battle.

Back then, Shinn was still young, and unable to properly understand the fact that their parents were killed in battle.

Though his parents were not with him, he could clearly sense their “voices.” Suddenly, one day, that “voice” vanished, replaced by a piece of paper. While someone else informed him that the paper stated that his parents were dead, the empty words seemed so surreal to him. They did not die as lingering silhouettes or skeletons, their “deaths” instead only expressed with a mere few sentences. For the child, who did not know what death was, the concept was insufficient for him to understand the meaning of an eternal farewell, and the disappointment and regrets of being unable to recoup anything.

More than disappointment and regret, he felt confused. Even though others told him he would not see his parents again, that they would never return again, he did not understand what it mean.

*Just obey what the priest and your brother say, and be a good boy.* So Shinn’s mother said on the morning she departed, patting him on the head. *Why isn’t she coming back?* He could not understand.

So, he went to ask his brother.

His brother Ray was ten years older than he was, and he knew everything, and could do anything. He would risk everything to protect his little brother, and doted on him more than anyone else.

Thus, if he was to ask his older brother, he would surely answer.

There was no light in the room. As the clear moonlight shone in, Ray stood alone. Shinn saw the back of his massive silhouette facing the door, and said, “Brother.”

Ray slowly turned around. His black eyes were reddened as he was rubbing his tears, his anguish and sadness breaking out like a flood from a dam. However, the eyes looked extremely distant, unlike his usual cavalier demeanor, and that terrified Shinn.

“Brother, where’s mom?”

The black eyes seemed to show a crack.

Shinn saw the eyes of his brother and heard the sigh, but he asked,

“Is mom not coming back? Why? ...Why did mom die?”

The silence was like the darkness in the room with the lights shut, and something broke.

The ice-encased black eyes immediately shattered, revealing the magma-like madness within. The next moment, Shinn was choked with an astounding amount of force, slammed to the floor.

“Ka...!”

The lungs exhaled due to the pressure, and he was choked mercilessly on the throat with a vicious grip, shutting his windpipe down. His vision was blurred due to a lack of oxygen. With all the weight and arm strength bearing down on him, his head was practically ripped off.

Ray’s black eyes were inches from him, giving off an extreme amount of excitement and malice.

**“—It’s all your fault.”**

The murmur escape through the gaps between the gritted teeth.

“It’s because of your presence that mom went to the battlefield. Mom died because of you. **You killed mom!**”

It’s all because of you.

He could hear the “voice” of his brother. The inner voice was louder than the thundering growl he was giving. That hellfire of a voice, that blood-stained blade of a voice, the consciousness behind it exposed upon him.

*It would have been good if you didn’t have that ability. Someone like you should not have been born. Get out from this world right now.*

*Die.*

“Sin. Your name. How fitting. It’s all your fault. Everything is all your fault! Mom’s death, my inevitable death, it’s going to be all your fault!”

His brother’s growl, his brother’s “voice,” they were extremely scary.

However, he could not move at all. Even though he tried shutting his ears, he could still hear that “voice.”

So Shinn chose to escape from **there**. He escaped deep into his consciousness, to the depths of his soul, until he could no longer see his parents.

And without knowing, he lost consciousness, and everything dispersed in the darkness.

He opened his eyes and found himself lying on the bed in the room, with only the priest next to him, his brother nowhere to be seen.

“It’s fine,” the priest told him. His brother was probably in the room, but he never saw his brother again.

Ray quickly finished the procedures for conscription and, a few days later, left the church. Shinn hid behind the priest as the latter led him to send his brother off.

His brother never said a single thing, nor looked back at him. His sidelong face still appeared to be filled with fury. Shinn was scared that if he was to speak up, he would be scolded, and never said anything to the very end.

His brother’s “voice,” which had always been by his ears, could no longer be heard. Several times, he summoned his courage and called out, but his brother never responded. Finally, he had to understand that his brother never forgave him... and never would, for eternity.

The scars on his neck never vanished, and would forever accompany him. It was then that he could hear something amazing in the distance.

He could not hear what the voice was saying; he could only understand that it was trying its best to tell him something.

Finally, that voice started seeping into the words of humans, but he could not determine what it was. It was not anything like a broken recorder that kept replaying the same contents, but something that yearned for something different.

Nobody, not even the priest, could hear that voice. Naturally, Shinn understood what that was.

It was likely that, on that night, he might have been killed by his brother.

Killed, and perished.

He died, but never vanished, only to remain on this world. That was why he could hear the voices of the ghosts, who were the same as him.

On a certain day, his brother's voice rang in his ears.

His brother died, and his brother kept calling for him from the distance.

It was on that day that Shinn did the paperwork, and joined the army.

## Chapter 9 - Fiat justitia, ruat cælum

“What—”

For a moment, she did not understand what Shinn was saying.

Everyone will die? Death row for this purpose?

“What are you, saying...”

At that moment, Lena realized.

Six years ago, she met Ray. Back then, he was an Eighty Sixer, a Processor.

The Eighty Sixers went to the battlefield of despair to regain the citizenships for themselves and their families.

So why did Shinn, as Ray’s little brother, remain an Eighty Sixer when he should be a citizen of the Republic because of Ray’s service, and remain as a Processor on the battlefield?

Also, this applied for the other Processors too. Every year, thousands of recruits were sent to the battlefield. What were their families and siblings doing?

“That—!”

*“Yeah. That’s it. Since the beginning, the white swine never thought of giving the Eighty Sixers citizenship at all.”*

*“They bluff us into being soldiers by using that as the incentive, and use us until we die. A bunch of white swine they are. Absolutely horrible.”*

Lena kept shaking her head, trying to deny it. It was likely that, for her ideals, this was truly an unacceptable fact.

“How is this, how is this possible—!?”

Seo sighed. He was not trying to reproach her, he was anguished, and had similar thoughts to her.

*“Look, we’re not blaming you here... but think about it. Ever since the war started, have you seen a single Eighty Sixer inside the Eighty Five legislative zones?”*

*“...Ah—”*

Eighty Sixers were required to serve for five years in the military so that they could regain their citizenship. Even if they were to die before their terms ended, the other family members should have been receiving citizenship.

However, the war had been going on for nine years. Logically, the families of the soldiers who died over these past nine years should have attained citizenship, but Lena had never ever seen a single one of them. Even though she was living in the first zone the entire time, that there were few Colorata in the first zone to begin with, it made no sense for her to not see a single one—!

Her foolishness left her utterly nauseous.

She should have thought of it a long time ago. The brothers Shinn and Ray, the children who had their parents and siblings around when they were in the Concentration Camps, that she could only spot Albas in the first zone. She had seen them all before, yet ignored them; even at this point, she had foolishly believed the Republic was in the right.

*“Most of the Processors die before they retire from service, so the issue of the promised citizenship isn’t much even though they never abided by it. The key though is for those with ‘Codenames’ like us, who lived through the hellish battlefield. We’ve been able to live through to today , aren’t exactly stupid, and are heroes to the other Eighty Sixers; they’re probably scared that we will be the spark to a rebellion.”*

Raiden’s voice was monotonous. He had lots of grudges against the Republic, but at this point, it was pointless to voice them.

*“Thus, they would have those with ‘Codenames’ assigned to the areas with the most intense battles, hoping that they would then die. Most of those ‘Codenamed’ do die like this. However, there are those that just won’t die at all, and these people are sent to the first defense team in the first battle zone, the last death row. Once they have enough ‘Codenamed’ to be executed, they have them sent here, and have them fight until every single one of them die. This is*

*the objective of our squadron's existence. There will be no new soldiers. Once we all die, the next batch to be executed will be sent over — this is our final battlefield. Sooner or later, we will die here."*

Lena felt dizzy, her world completely turned upside down.

Having them continue fighting was not about protecting the Republic, but for them to die.

That was no regimented conscription, but utter genocide through enemy hands.

"B-But."

Lena said, grasping at straws for the last bit of hope,

"I-If you can fight on until the very end..."

*"Oh, there are some who just won't die and live until the very end... so to deal with these guys, at the end of their service, they will be sent to deal with some special recon mission, where the success and survival rate is practically zero. Nobody will be able to survive. For those white swine, the trash's cleared out. Job well done."*

"..."

To protect their homeland, they ventured forth into the battlefield of death, even though their efforts would not be rewarded. If they survived long enough, they were deemed a calamity, and forced into a more dangerous battlefield, waiting to die. The squadron established for this execution continued to fight until this point. And at the very end — she was going to order them to die.

Rage became tears, blurring her vision.

This country had become so rotten, fallen.

She recalled Seo and Raiden grumbling that there was nothing to do.

She recalled Shinn having no thoughts about life after service.

For they did not, and would not, have any future to look forward to, and no time to prepare for it.

All that awaited them would be a signed execution order, the moment it

would be implemented, never to be avoided.

“Y-You knew about this...?”

*“Yeah... sorry. Nobody dared say this to you, not even Shinn or Raiden.”*

“Wh-When did you...?”

Lena heard her own voice quaking. Krena answered, her voice exceptionally cold,

*“Right from the beginning. My older sister, Seo’s parents, Shinn’s family, none of them returned after they entered the battlefield, and we never left the Concentration Camp. The white swine will never fulfill their promises... everyone already knew about it.”*

“Then why do you still fight!? Have you not thought about running away... taking revenge on the Republic!?”

Upon hearing Lena’s anguished, furious question, Raiden closed his eyes, and gave a wry smile.

“Where can we go to? The <Legion> is before us, and we have mines and intercepting cannons behind us. Rebellion is an option... but given our numbers, it’s impossible.”

If it had been the generation of their parents, there might have been a fighting chance. However, that generation of people fought on not to exact vengeance on the Republic, but for their families to regain lives as proper humans. If they did not fight with their utmost, the ones dead would be their families and children, locked in the Concentration Camps outside the <Grand Mur>. They could only believe in the sweet talk of the Republic, and continue the hopeless battle.

Once their parents died, the generation of the eldest children understood that they would be unable to attain citizenship, and continued to fight to prove their identities as citizens of the Republic. They tried to fulfill their duties as citizens, fighting for their country, and pick up the identities and pride that their country had trampled upon. They wanted to prove that they were real citizens

of the Republic, they who had fought and given their all, and not the white swine who had abandoned their duty to defend.

And for Raiden and the others, they had nothing.

The families they wanted to protect were long gone, and they were all too young when when they were sent to Concentration Camps or locked in the cramped gardens.

Whether it was their memories strolling freely on the streets, or their experience of being treated as humans, that time was way too distant for them. All they knew was a life boxed in by metal fences and mines, a lifestyle no different from livestock, and the oppressors who had created everything, called the Republic. They did not know of the Republic who had once hailed freedom, equality, fraternity, justice, and purity, and were reduced to livestock before they even realized they were citizens of the Republic, and proud of it.

To Raiden and the others, they did not think of themselves as citizens of the Republic.

They were Eighty Sixers, born to the battlefield, and to die on the battlefield, the homeland they were most familiar with being the battlefield surrounded with enemies, and they were citizens who would meet their demise in battle. Such was their identity, their pride.

The Republic of San Magnolia was simply a **foreign land**, only for white swine to live in, and they did not care.

*“Then, why...”*

Thus, they had no need to answer her doubt.

But they wanted to tell her. Even in the face of angry lashings, even after hearing the chilling groans of the ghosts, she insisted, and even desired to interact with them. Perhaps they had all been touched by the foolishness of that obstinate girl.

Raiden’s squadmates remained silent, but not because they refused to say anything. Once he was sure of this, Raiden spoke up,

“Until I was twelve, I was hidden by an Alba granny in the ninth zone.”

“...? *What...*”

“The one who raised Shinn was an Alba priest who refused to retreat, and stayed inside the Concentration Camp. Seo did mention the story of his squad leader, right? We know the white swine are those that did those despicable acts, and of them all, Krena saw the worst of them. Angel and Shinn even saw some Eighty Sixers who were as despicable as they are.”

Some were so unbearably uncouth, and some remained dazzlingly pure. They were clear on what one of them, or both of them, were like.

“So we made our decisions. It’s simple. How to be a despicable cad, and how to be a noble, upright person.”

Inside the cramped cockpit, he straightened his body, and looked up.

He had long forgotten about the old granny’s teachings about God, or the words to say for prayer. However, the image of her lying on the road, wailing away shabbily remained fresh in his mind.

“If we wanted to take revenge, it wouldn’t be that difficult; just give up fighting. Let the <Legion> pass through... we won’t survive, but the Republic would be doomed. There are times when we do think the white swine should all be killed.”

Even though their compatriots in the Concentration Camps would be doomed as well, it was a matter of years until they died... for the Processors, the choice to give up was not a difficult one.

“But, well, even amongst the Albas, there are those who chose to come here to die, and even if we want to take revenge like that, the outcome remains the same.”

“...”

Lena did not seem to understand. *Are you really fine with this?* Such words could almost be heard from her. Raiden was completely gobsmacked. *This girl’s really kind, and also stupid. Perhaps she had never thought about revenge or something like that.*

The real hatred and vengeance was not simply about killing off those they

hated.

“True revenge is only done by having the offenders thoroughly understand what they did, regret and kneel on the ground, begging for forgiveness while wailing, before killing them... but the white swine have already done all kinds of disgusting things. No way they will be reflecting on their actions just because of a rebellion or utter defeat, you know? You won't be reflecting on your own incompetence, instead just lambasting others as trash, and act as a victim, a tragic hero... no way will anyone else want to be like those scumbags who end up being delusional.”

Before he knew it, his voice was filled with rage.

For them, that was the most unforgivable act.

The soldiers who mocked the granny who resisted out of kindness.

The weak, dreaming citizens who shut their eyes and ears, running away from the reality that was war, and hid behind the <Grand Mur>.

The white swine who refused to fulfill their duties, and robbed the rights of others, unabashedly hailing that only they were noble and upright, and unable to understand the hypocrisy of their actions.

No way would anyone else want to end up like them.

“While the scum did inhumane things to us, if we do similar things to them, we'll end up as scum, just like them. If there is the option to fight the <Legion> until the very end, or to give up and die, then we will choose to fight until the very end, never giving up, and never being reduced to trash. This is the reason why we fight, our *raison d'être*, our pride... though it might appear that we're protecting the white swine, that doesn't matter now.”

They were the Eighty Sixers, discarded upon the battlefield, citizens of the battlefield.

They would fight until they were completely exhausted, fight and live on to the very end, with their own abilities, and that would be their pride.

The Handler girl bit her lips. Everyone sensed a sense of rustic blood not belonging to them.

*“You know the outcome... that you won’t be able to escape death, right?”*

Her voice seemed to be yearning for their vengeance, inflicted upon herself. Raiden grimaced,

“Nobody’s going to hang himself just because he’s going to die tomorrow. We’re going to get onto the guillotine sooner or later, and we’re going to choose how we do it. We made our decisions already. We’re just going to keep living with our convictions.”

And it was because they knew the meaningless, tragic death was inevitable that they could face it head on.

The doors to the empty hangar remained open, and Raiden stopped in his tracks once he saw the shadow and “Scavenger” approaching. It was night, in the beginning of Autumn, and the air was chilly, the moon a little blue, and in the pitch black sky above, the stars exceptionally sharp. The stars and moon remained so dazzling, so hear, even though some died on that day.

This world definitely would not show bias towards humanity. Even without humanity, the Earth would continue to revolve.

“—It’s fine. This isn’t your fault. Thanks for today too.”

“...Pi.”

Shinn saw Fido leave gloomily as it lowered its shoulders (literally bending its front end forward), and returned to the hangar. Raiden asked him,

“Kino and the others?”

“Yeah. Seems like it can’t find the scraps of Chise’s unit. It’s been a while since we found a replacement.”

“Can’t we use the plane model Chise used instead? The main wing should be fine... but we can’t find the scraps. Guess nothing really remains after that shot.”

On this day, Fido had scavenged about for a very long time. Having followed the death god for a while, it learned however to seek the shrapnel of KIA units, and provided them for Shinn to write down their names as a memorial. While it

was not Fido's job originally, it had become its prioritized mission.

Raiden had heard Shinn mention that Fido was taught to do so. In the past, Fido cut away the debris with the personal mark, and Shinn dumped that into the cockpit of the "Undertaker," together with the other metal gravestones he had.

"Look, you're probably not too bothered by it, but I just want to say that it's not your fault."

Shinn's ability could only detect the position of enemies, and was unable to determine their type. He could somewhat infer it based on the enemy's formation and numbers to some extent, but it was impossible for him to determine that there was a brand new unit type way behind the <Legion>.

Shinn glanced at Raiden, and shrugged wordlessly, probably showing that he really was not bothered. Raiden, however, felt that it was fine. Those killed were mentally prepared, did their best, and died. It was their fault, not others', not Shinn's.

The clear red eyes looked up at the sky above the battlefield, and Raiden followed suit. The hyper long distance cannon was there in the day.

"...I thought the next shot would have hit the base directly. This is unexpected."

"The heavy cannon's purpose is to provide suppressing fire and destroy stationary targets. It can't snipe armored weapons precisely, and isn't used to attack squadrons. It's likely the attack target is a city, or a base. I'm guessing they fired a few shots at us as a test."

Raiden sneered,

"A few shots, and four down, huh? No way we can fight."

"If it's actually used, the Republic, not just four people, will be wiped out. It's one thing if it's us here... but what is the Major going to do? Let's hope they have some countermeasures there."

Shinn flatly spoke, but Raiden was a little bemused. It seemed Shinn had not realized it at all.

“...What?”

“Nothing.”

Never before had Shinn been worried about a Handler.

“...Anyway, it’s the same as a Scorpion, there’s an observation unit at the target area. Right now, they aren’t firing.”

“You know that too?”

“I remembered the voice. No matter which one it is, I can tell once it starts moving the next moment... it’s unlikely they’ll fire again though.”

“...?”

Raiden looked at Shinn in shock. The latter kept staring at the distant battlefield, narrowing his eyes.

**“I’ve been found.** More or less, he’s sharing the optical sensor with an Ameise.”

**“...! Your brother...!?”**

Raiden gasped audibly. He knew. They had never met, but they had fought against the <Legion> led by him a few times. That “Shepherd’s” tactics were devious, cruel, and terrifyingly delicate.

Shinn looked over at where the enemy was most likely at, and smiled.

It was the smile of a war devil, mixed with an equal portion of fear and guts, a challenge against Death itself. His slender body was shaking, and he subconsciously cupped his body with his arms.

“I already knew he’s in this battle zone, but he finally found me. Next time, he’s coming for my life. He’s not going to take the easy option and finish me off with that cannon.”

Raiden felt a shiver as he saw his usually blasé comrade give off a maniacal presence like never before, and had to narrow his eyes.

Shinn was looking for his brother, the one who had once killed him, the one who had died in a certain ruin on the Eastern battlefield, his head taken away by the enemy, and who was taken by the <Legion>.

The Death God was smiling. It was an icy blade, sharp and cold, a twisted, demented smile. The cold leer was akin to an ancient blade that been deformed and honed due to the many battlefields, aiming at its prey, aiming to end its existence.

“For me, it’s a perfect opportunity not to be missed, but it doesn’t look like you guys are lucky... what now? Go hang ourselves before we die tomorrow?”

Raiden too was leering heinously. It was born out the stubbornness of a hungry wolf following its survival instincts, leaping madly at its prey, an intense will to live.

*“129 days till Run Out Date!! Fucking Glory to Spearhead Squadron!!”*

The Run Out Date, or their deaths. That show of stupid optimism was a countdown to their execution.

The countdown had been stopped for the moment, and the actual number of days left was thirty two. Even if that number reached zero, they would continue to fight, until the day they died.

“You kidding me... we’re going along with you, our Death God.”

†

“Eh, how do I put it though... this is really something our country would do.”

After hearing Lena’s explanation, Arnett looked utterly speechless.

Both of them had come to Arnett’s research lab so as to avoid any eavesdropping. The tabletop had a pair of matching white and black bunny mugs, along with some strange cookies that were half purple, half pink.

“Please, Arnett, help. We have to... stop this.”

Arnett maintained a disinterested look as she picked up a cookie.

Her silver eyes turned towards Lena.

“And the details?”

Those eyes were dry and cold, like those of a witch who had lived thousands of years, and was aloof to everything else.

“Are you going to present a speech on TV? Negotiate directly with the

superiors? You know that's pointless, right? If people could have a change in heart just by hearing an idealized, riveting speech, things wouldn't have ended up like this. You know this logic well."

"That is..."

"I said that's enough already. It's pointless. You can't do anything here. So..."

"Stop, Arnett."

Lena finally had enough of listening, and interrupted. Arnett was an important friend. Even so, she could not let her friend say such a thing.

"This is an important matter of life and death. You know that, no... you are remaining as the villain by inaction. Enough fooling around."

"You are the one fooling around!"

Arnett suddenly stood up. Faced with her sudden outburst, Lena was speechless.

"Haven't you had enough already!? How many times must I say that we can't do anything!? We can't do anything to help those people!"

"Arnett...!?"

"I had a friend."

Arnett's voice suddenly quieted, as though the shout was an illusion.

It was the feeble voice of a hapless girl, who was lost as a result.

"It's the neighbor's child. My father, and that child's father were both researchers at the same university, friends even. I used to play with that child often. That child's mother, the whole family, had some strange ability. That aunt, that child, and his brother who's older by a few years, they could sense each other even though they weren't together."

Her father was a neurologist, a researcher analyzing brain functions as humans interacted with each other.

That child's family was an expert in Artificial Intelligence, and yearned to produce an Artificial Intelligence which could be friends with humans.

Thus, the research never caused harm to others. They put on the toy-like

sensor, and spoke to someone else in another room, enacting an experiment that was like a game. It was boring from time to time, but Arnett insisted to play along too, and even participated in the experiment. The trial testers for the actual experiments were students from her father's lab, basically all of them, hoping to gain credits, and also to get the sweets made by her mother.

There was not much progress in the research, but Arnett was really happy.

"But everything ended when the war began."

She entered elementary school, but that child never came along. Back then, the discrimination against Colorata had become really dire.

In school, Arnett was bullied, berated for having a dirty Colorata friend, and was really peeved about it.

Once she got home, she found the boy waiting at her home, hoping to play with her, and she vented all her frustrations upon him.

They had a squabble. She got increasingly infuriated, *You Colorata are filthy*, and finally blurted it out.

That boy never looked really sad, but instead, confused, as he did not understand what she was saying. There was a divide between them that could no longer be mended, and caused by none other than herself. Faced with this fact, Arnett shivered.

She was terrified. Utterly terrified.

Her parents discussed the matter of hiding her friend's family, and weighed the friendship with her friend with their own safeties; when her father inquired her, she answered.

Her father was probably hoping for someone to prompt him, and help him make the decision. However, she pointed in the opposite direction.

*I don't care about that child. I'm not going to be in danger just because of him.*

The following day, that child and his family were brought to a Concentration Camp.

All she could say to herself was that she had no choice, that she could only do this right from the beginning.

However.

Arnett gave a crooked smile. *That should have been the case, so why is this friend before me so trusting of me?*

“Hey, Lena. You kept acting like some pure Saintess, but you’re an accomplice too... think about it. How many Eighty Sixers were killed for that RAID device you’re wearing?”

“Wait.”

Human experiment...

“Voices needed to be conveyed, so animals can’t be used for the experiments. We say that Eighty Sixers are not humans, but we used them as humans for this instance... we had to get results as soon as possible, and never thought about the safety of the testers in the design of the experiment. My father was assigned to be the head of this research.”

While Arnett’s father had never said anything to her, she did read through his records.

Most of them had their brains burned out due to the excessive burden, and lost their personalities, before dying off in endless pain.

The adults were taken to be laborers and soldiers, and the ones used for experimenting were all children.

The Eighty Sixers had no names left behind, and were managed as numbers.

Thus, did the children of the same age as that boy, who died tragically in the experimental lab in a certain Concentration Camp, **include that boy himself?** Neither her father nor anyone else could affirm.

“Father’s death was not an accident. He killed himself.”

He, who left his friend for dead, and personally caused the deaths and suffering of many more, would certainly die off in more anguish than any single

one of them.

Yes, that was what her father kept repeating. There was no way he could have implemented a wrong value by mistake.

*So I, who left that child for dead, share the same sin.* So Arnett thought as she took over her father's research.

A Handler killed himself. The military had her investigate the dead's RAID device. Once she heard that the cause might be related to a single Processor, she suddenly had a thought.

*If I have the military bring that Processor over for investigation, what will happen?*

*If that person is an important experimental sample, I can hide him until the war ends. It's no different from detention, but he can live. I can save someone, even if it's just one.*

So she thought, and she was shocked by that thought.

Because back then, she refused to help that child.

When she heard the trash in the logistical department refuse to carry out their jobs, she heaved a sigh of relief. *See, I can't do anything after all. I can't save a single one.*

"But you are the same too."

It was laughable. This friend before her was too kind, too foolish, and never thought of these things, not knowing how low humanity's malice would stoop too.

"You can't do anything too — it's because you continue to insist that they remain alive that you have to order them to 'die,' right? You could have just played along with them, let them die sooner, and now you've dragged your feet for so long that you have to personally order them to. It's all your fault!"

Lena gasped. Arnett was utterly relieved, and yet guilt-ridden as she saw that pearly face gradually turn pale.

*Again, I made the same mistake.*

*Again.*

She grabbed the mug, and threw it hard into the trashbin. It was the matching mug they had both picked out and packaged together. The first cup of coffee was brewed in this room.

The porcelain shattered, like a shriek in her feeble heart.

“I really hate you, Lena... don’t let me see your face again.”

†

From then on, Spearhead Squadron undertook another two interception mission, and again, three people died.

During the two missions, the <Legion’s> tactics differed vastly from any of the ones they had previously encountered. The long-distance cannons were used, and the tactics were guileful, cruel, and sharp. Shinn said that the enemy had a “Shepherd.” Ever since the long distance cannon was used, it remained in the backlines, commanding, and never came to the frontlines.

During that time, Lena could not do anything. Whether it was to provide covering fire, or to revoke the punishment.

And finally, she received the order.

“A long-term scouting mission to head into the deepest part of the <Legion> controlled territory—!?”

Once she saw the contents of the absurd mission on the PDA, she groaned.

The participants of this mission would be all of the “Juggernauts” which had survived since the initial formation of the squadron.

The destination of this mission was the very end.

There was no time limit. During the mission, if any member was to retreat or return, they would be deemed as deserters, and were to be executed immediately.

At the same time, all records of the members’ Para-RAID, login of units, and Republic Military ranks were to be deleted.

They were allotted a month's worth of supplies for this mission.

And also, all support from HQ or other squadrons was forbidden, and not recognized.

...Utterly preposterous.

No way it was a scouting mission. It was simply to have them enter the enemy ranks and die meaninglessly, just not stated in black and white. It was not even a mission to begin with.

They could not survive days, let alone a month. With the <Legion> continuing to attack, the scouting forces would be wiped out. After countless meaningless battles, they were still going to be abandoned deep inside the battlefield, and die alone.

Lena gritted her aching teeth, and stood up abruptly, ignoring the chair that had toppled over.

“Are you requesting that I retract the special scouting assignment, Lena?”

“Please, Uncle Jerome. We cannot allow this to continue.”

Lena lowered her head desperately before her last bit of hope, Carl-Stahl.

While doing her investigations to stop this mission, she had learned that this pointless order was a “tradition” in the Republic's Army that had existed and endured to the present time.

Spearhead was not the only case. There was the Razoredge Squadron, the first defense squadron on the first battle zone along the southern battlefront, Longbow Squadron, the first defense squadron on the first battle zone along the western battlefront, and Sledgehammer Squadron, the first defense squadron on the first battle zone along the northern battlefront. These squadrons were all wiped out within six months, and the few survivors were all sent for a “special scouting” mission, the survival rate being zero, no exceptions. Truly, they were sending all the Eighty Sixers who lived until the very end to the final execution ground, just to wipe them out—

Carl-Stahl looked at the report in his hands.

“...Impressive. Typically, only one or two would participate in the special scouting mission. You are the only Handler who could have a small squadron participate in this — so I said, do not do anything unnecessary.”

“ ... ”

It’s because of you that they have lived to today, for nothing.

She recalled Arnett’s words, and was left terrified. However, she gritted her teeth, and begged.

“Please. The Republic... we cannot continue to make this mistake.”

“ ... ”

“As you said, morals and justice may not be enough to move them, but what about the benefits to the country? We are just losing outstanding Processors, fighting strength for the Republic, and it benefits the Republic, safety-wise. If it is you, you should be able to discuss this during the National Defense Meeting, or an open debate...”

Carl-Stahl frowned as he heard Lena out. He then slowly spoke up, still frowning,

“The Republican Government and its people are all secretly thinking that having all the Eighty Sixers wiped out will be the greatest benefit to the Republic, and the Republic’s army is simply accepting this ideal. Now why do you not think this way?”

“What...!?”

She was stunned. Ignoring all formalities, she slammed her hands on the antique desk, and leaned forward.

“What are you saying!? I just said that this is simply a waste of the Republic’s strength and conscience.”

“If there are any Eighty Sixers left alive after the war ends, everything we did to them shall be criticized and recompensed. Forced detention, confiscation of property, compulsory military service, have you ever thought about how much everything would cost? Do you think the citizens of the Republic now would agree to increased taxes for pensions?”

“...This...”

“And if there are any surviving countries nearby, we have already hurt their compatriots. Once this is revealed to the world, the Republic shall lose its reputation and pride, and will be shamed for millennia as oppressors... all the consequences can be erased, as long as all the Eighty Sixers die off.”

She gasped, and gritted her teeth. She recalled the words Shinn said.

“So that is why you never reclaimed the corpses of the KIA, and never buried them...!”

“Yes. And to add on, there are no records of the dead, whether in the concentration camps, or within the confinements of the <Grand Mur>. All the personal records of the dead Processors have all been deleted. The moment they are all dead, they will have never existed. Since they never existed, nobody can say that they were oppressed, and all facts that undermine the fraternity of the Republic will be void.”

“...To think the people of the Republic are so vicious...”

For some reason, Carl-Stahl’s expression had a tinge of anguish to it.

“Secretly, this is what everyone thinks. A small minority dare to say it, but most have quietly allowed it, either apathetic about it or just following along, but even so, they have all agreed to this... this is the result of the Republicanism we are so proud of, Lena. Most of the people hoped to sacrifice the Eighty Sixers for their own benefit. Since the people have so decreed it, we as soldiers can only abide. What do you think?”

Lena slammed the table, which gave a blunt sound that dispersed flatly in the room.

“Republicanism is definitely not about sacrificing the few for the benefit for many! There is a need to treat every single person equally, no matter what; that is the teaching of our five colored flag, and the constitution built for this purpose, right!? If we cannot do this, what is this will of the Republic!?”

At that moment, Carl-Stahl’s eyes showed a heavy glint. It was a reproaching one to Lena, and also, a deep resentment towards something vague and distant.

“If there are no values worth respecting on the Constitution, the Constitution is just a worthless piece of paper. Like the revolutionary San Magnolia back in the day, all the revolution’s government needed was her name and image, and after the monarchy was toppled, the Saint was secretly executed in jail.”

Lena gasped as she heard that spiteful tone. It was the first time she had heard her uncle’s voice filled with such entrenched fury.

“Are you saying this is violence? Of course. This is the result of letting the foolish people do whatever they want; giving political power to those who want unlimited power and yet are unwilling to bear it. This is the result of handing this political power to animals who only care about trampling over others, and consider nothing but their own benefits and desires. They harp upon the Saint, but all they do is to stain the name of the Saint with their folly. What else can the lazy, despicable imbeciles do other than the bad!?”

This agitated Carl-Stahl suddenly had a change in tone, and let out a deep sigh, sinking deep into his armchair.

“Lena, for us humans, freedom and equality is too distant... probably unattainable.”

Lena’s eyes showed no expression. She could only lower her head at the man she once saw as her second father, the one she admired. She had no choice other than to endure the condescension that was rising in her heart.

“All that shows is that you have fallen into despair, and you have tried rationalizing it... it is a grave mistake to watch the innocents lose their lives, and do nothing, all for this reason.”

Carl-Stahl lifted his eyes back towards Lena. His silver eyes were weary, defeated.

“This hope you speak of, hope, is unable to save anyone. Ideals too. Because they are so exalted, we are not affected in the slightest. Because our ideals, our hopes, are unable to move anyone... you came to me, did you not?”

Lena gritted her teeth. He was right.

“Despair and hope are actually the same thing. They are two sides of the same coin, always being sought, but never to be attained.”

“...”

But even so, even if it was pointless, there was the choice to await their fates.

Even if it was pointless, there was the choice to fight fate to the very end. The two choices clearly differed.

But this man before her might never understand this point, ever.

*Ahh, I see, so this is despair.*

“...Farewell, Brigadier General Carl-Stahl.”

†

At the same time that Lena received the special scouting mission, Spearhead Squadron received the same orders, and everyone began preparations without saying anything more. They sorted out the airdropped supplies for the mission, and ensured that all the necessary items in the base were in fine condition, even the “Scavenger” that was chosen to transport the supplies. The “Juggernauts” could not be maintained and repaired once the mission started, so the maintenance team checked through all the “Juggernauts” thoroughly. The Processors, who were not returning to this base, checked through their belongings.

The preparations were summarized in a report, and submitted to Shinn. The latter’s job was to check through all the items and ensure they were in proper state.

Audreht, who was proficient in supply preparations and allocation, volunteered to handle the preparation work. The empty hangar seemed so empty as he and Shinn remained in a corner filled with containers, leisurely affirming that all the checks were done.

“Rations, energy packs, ammunition, spare parts, we loaded them up just as needed. And for this stupid squad leader, a few extra leg parts. You know how to do some simple repairs, right?”

“Yeah. I always wreck them.”

“Shitty brat, always with the stupid comebacks... you only have one unit. Don’t fight in that same manner now.”

Once he had the old mechanic mutter so with a deep, earnest voice, Shinn merely shrugged. Even though he was asked to do so, he could not do what he was incapable of. If he did not go all out against the enemy <Legion> units, he would have trouble saving his own life.

“It’s the end already. Can’t you just say ‘copy that,’ even if it’s a lie? Just do what I say here, okay?”

“Sorry.”

“Goodness, you cheeky brat...”

Audreht snorted, and silence then beckoned upon the surrounding space. Shinn did not mind this awkward atmosphere, while Audreht scratched his cotton white hair, and spoke up,

“...Shinn. Once all preparations are done, call all the kids here. I’ve got something to say to you lot.”

Shinn was a little skeptical, and tilted his head towards Audreht’s grim face shielded by his sunglasses. *What is it?* He was about to ask, but the Para-RAID activated, and he could only swallow his words.

“...*Captain Nouzen.*”

“Major. What is it?”

Shinn answered, gesturing that he was unavailable. Audreht nodded, and left.

“...*The special scouting mission has been relayed to me.*”

“Affirmative. Preparations are proceeding smoothly with no delays. Is there any change in the situation?”

Unlike Lena’s strangely grim tone, Shinn was as nonchalant in his response as usual, as though he had just received another typical order. Once she heard the callousness of that tone, Lena gritted her teeth.

“*I apologize. Given my capabilities now, I really cannot retract the orders.*”

Lena pursed her lips. A moment later, she finally had enough, and spoke up.

“Please run away. You have no need to fulfill this foolish order.”

She was utterly ashamed of her own incompetence. She could not retract this preposterous order, and could only give such irresponsible advice.

His answer remained poised and serene. It was a question, but in essence, it was a denial.

*“Where to?”*

*“...”*

She knew. There was no place for them to run to. Even if there was, they would not survive. With so few of them, they could not ensure the most basic of food. It was obvious.

No person could survive alone. Thus, people gathered together, forming villages and cities, and built countries.

The establishment meant to sustain human livelihood was going to sentence them to death.

There was an inexplicable rage rising in Lena’s heart, and she exclaimed, “Why are you, always like this...!?”

She could not bear to see him accept his death so callously, like a death convict who had admitted his guilt, even though he had never sinned!

*“Because there is nothing to have a grudge over. Everyone dies, and we will just die earlier than others. Pointing the finger is not going to change that.”*

“But you cannot be saying that! You are going to be killed!? Your future, your hopes, even your lives are going to be taken away from you without reason, and yet you do not have any grudges? There is no way this can happen!”

Shinn went silent as he heard her weeping voice. After a while, he finally spoke up, with a grimace in his voice.

*“Major, we are not sending ourselves to our deaths.”*

His voice had no sense of longing or reluctance, instead it sounded crisp and clear.

*“Until today, we have been locked up here, bound here. Everything is going to end though. We can finally head forth to a road we can look forward to, to the*

*distant place we are hoping for. Can you please not belittle the precious freedom we have here?"*

Lena kept shaking her head. That was not freedom. Real freedom is permitted by law, and does not intrude upon the rights of others. The desire to go anywhere, to do whatever they want, or freedom of thought that remains unhindered, this freedom is a right any individual should have.

To choose their burial ground the next day, to choose the path towards death. Such limited choices surely could not be considered freedom.

"Th-Then, at least, please do not fight. You should know where the <Legion> is, so you can avoid them and safely move on..."

*"That is impossible. Even if we do know where they are, it is impossible for us to pass through without them being alerted. To move forward, we must fight... we are already aware of that."*

For a moment, Shinn grinned.

He was not saying that he knew, but that he was eagerly looking forward to it.

Lena finally lowered her eyes, unable to endure this. Thus,

"—You want to fight your brother, who is in the <Legion>, right?"

Silence lingered. Finally, Shinn sighed with some frustration.

*"...Why is it that you always notice such useless things?"*

"Of course I would. That's because."

When he said that he was seeking the deceased Ray, and the "Shepherd" in the first battle zone, Shinn showed a cold, broken smile, just like the one now.

Shinn himself might not have noticed it. Just as one would not notice his own facial expression, he might have been the only one who never noticed the thoughts in the bottom of his heart.

Fear, rage, persistence, drive, countless emotions were intertwined, forming a merciless, maniacal blade leaping towards him.

It was not anticipation, but the opposite.

"All the more that I cannot allow you to battle. Even if it is the <Legion>, to

fight against your own brother is...”

*“Brother is a ‘Shepherd.’ We cannot avoid him.”*

His voice was stiff, spiteful. It was the first time she had heard a voice filled with rage from him.

“Captain.”

*“If you are willing to command, please do not synchronize with us... Raiden and Kaie must have said it countless times already.”*

She heard the icy tone, and gasped. This intensity from Shinn came only for a moment, and then, he let out a long sigh, reverting back to the usual nonchalant tone.

*“...Major, you don’t have to command us anymore.”*

“That...”

*“I’ll correct what I just said... I don’t want you to hear my brother’s last words.”*

He did not want Lena, the girl who knew only of Ray’s outstretched kind hands and smile, hear the voice of curses and malice.

“...”

*“And one other thing. Further East from here, beyond the border, there are no voices of the <Legion>.”*

He sounded as though he was callously mentioning something he had just forgotten.

Or perhaps, he was deliberately speaking with such a tone, to hide something.

“...Captain Nouzen.”

*“Maybe that is the maximum hearing range for me, or maybe there are other survivors on the other side. If it’s the latter, the Republic will probably be saved before it gets wiped out... without the ‘Shepherd,’ the <Legion> will be confused for the time being, and we can buy some time until then. So, please hang until then, Major.”*

His tone remained aloof, icy, but there was an earnest wish behind it. Hearing

his words, Lena could only clench her fists.

†

During the interception battle that day, Haruto was killed.

It was the first time that Lena had not taken command, from the beginning to the end of the battle.

And so, the day to undertake the special scouting mission came.

They boarded the “Juggernauts,” and activated the system, showing lines of messages and checksum results on the screen. The sub-screen showed the number of friendlies. Raiden glanced at it, and snorted.

“Five of us, huh? Too bad for that Haruto.”

If he could have survived another two days, he could have joined in on their parade to paradise.

He could hear a sigh from Seo through the synchronized communicator.

*“In the end, Major never contacted us, huh?”*

“What? You’re sounding pretty lonely there Seo.”

*“No, not at all... but.”*

Seo tilted his head slightly.

*“Maybe I was a little concerned? More or less.”*

*“Given that she’s accompanied us till this point, I suppose she could have said goodbye.”*

*“Right, I feel the same, Angel. Doesn’t matter if she’s around, but if she was, she could have said something.”*

*“That’s enough already. We told her many times not to bother about us, and now we’ve finally shaken her off. Isn’t this fine?”*

Krena seemed a little peeved as she said so. Seo and Angel were holding in their laughter, *What’s with that?* and she puffed her cheeks in response.

Raiden tapped the inner wall of his cockpit, quietly agreeing. He never expected that Lena would never contact them again since that incident. He did not think she would retreat at this moment... but she might have been quietly distraught due to some stupid guilt.

*I wanted to say a few words to her... doesn't matter now.*

The final checks were done, and the units activated. The display screens flickered a few times before they lit up, and appearing on the monitor was the maintenance crew that had spent time with them for half a year. Though they knew the ones on the outside could not see, everyone lowered their heads deeply.

Fido waited quietly at the back of the procession. It carried a month's worth of supplies, living necessities, and another five containers of ammunition installed at its legs, resembling a centipede.

Thus, everyone got ready. Once they took the next step forward, they could not turn back. Once the operation began, their military ranks, along with the login records stashed in the Republic Army HQ, would all be thoroughly erased, and the login message to register the Handler for command purposes was to be deleted at noon, or perhaps they would be unable to connect once they left the jurisdiction area. Once they retreated, they would be met by Republican fire, and they could only head forth towards the land of death, until they themselves died.

For some reason, even when faced with such a future, Raiden was exceptionally calm.

When he was first assigned to this squadron, he had already been prepared for this.

Back then, Daiya was still alive, and there were the six of them. These six boarded a transport carrier from their respective old squadrons, and he met Kaie, Haruto, and Kino in this camp. The members had a commemorative photo together, and pasted it on the squad book. Whenever the squadron was shuffled, they would take photos again. They all held papers containing their numbers, standing before the wall with the markers like prisoners. Once the squadron disbanded, all of its data would be abandoned, and their photos

would probably be deleted on this night, not a single one would remain. They once begged a kind-looking soldier to take a photo of them... but how long would it remain?

That night, all of them stood together, and swore.

Even if they were ridiculed as pigs, they would never fall and become pigs. They would fight until the bitter end, until the last man.

*Not bad. Managed to survive till five were left.*

He chuckled, and naturally thought of their squad leader, the “Undertaker,” along with the mark that was etched on his unit, the headless skeleton lifting a shovel. It symbolized the Death God, their Death God, that had led the squad to this point, and remained with them in life and in death.

Accompanying them was the little aluminium grave, along with the other five hundred and seventy six KIA he had buried up to this point.

Raiden sensed Shinn open his slightly closed red eyes, and heard a quiet voice.

*“Let’s go.”*

Upon hearing that soft voice, it awoke from its standby phase.

It’s coming. It’s still far away, but it’s closing in. After looking for him for so long, they were finally going to meet again. For this purpose, it had waited for so long, angsty and jumpy, ready to pounce.

It could not wait. This time, it wanted to welcome it. Surely, this time.

The voice of the ghosts lingering by Shinn’s ears suddenly got louder, and began to move. That voices gathered together, like a rampaging tidal wave engulfing the land, looming towards them.

The silver Eintagsfliege before the troops were clustered, covering the entire sky, and the sun was darkened as a result.

*“...Shinn.”*

“Yeah.”

Raiden hissed, and Shinn tersely noted. The enemy was right before them, on the path they had chosen. If they had taken a different path, the enemy would adjust accordingly and move forward.

...It was to be expected. If Shinn could hear the <Legion>, naturally, the enemy could hear him too.

After looking at the landscape, they chose a path of little contour. Since they could not evade, they chose a place where it would be easier to battle.

The radar screen showed blips of the enemy positions. In an instant, the blips increased in numbers, almost overlapping, and their path forward was covered in white.

They passed through the hills, and came to a stretch of grassland and forest, the forest being to the left.

Before their eyes was an endless stretch of army.

Leading the front was the Vanguard of Ameise. The Löwe and Grauwolf were mixed in the armored corps two kilometers to the back, and further back was the second wave, with a third wave that could barely be seen behind. The artillery team of Scorpions was most likely behind them. It seemed the entire armada of the first battle zone <Legion> was before them.

Amongst them, Shinn’s attention was lured to a Dinosauria that was tailing an Ameise.

It was at least four meters tall, twice the weight of a Löwe. It was covered in impenetrable armor, its eight legs providing an astounding amount of mobility and explosiveness, like a land battlecruiser. The massive 155mm cannon and the 75mm coaxial subcannon were aimed at them, the two 12.7mm heavy machine guns atop the body looking like toys on the massive beast of steel.

Even without listening, Shinn knew the “Shepherd” was leading this armada. It did not set the army along all possible routes, and predicted the path they would choose, setting up camp there. It was impossible for the “Sheep” to analyze the conditions and predict where the enemy would proceed.

And this “Shepherd” was hidden in the deepest part of the first battle zone.

“...*Shinn.*”

That deep voice was the crucial evidence he needed. Shinn recalled that voice very well, and was never able to forget. It was the last thing he had heard when he was alive, that voice, those words.

The same voice was calling for him.

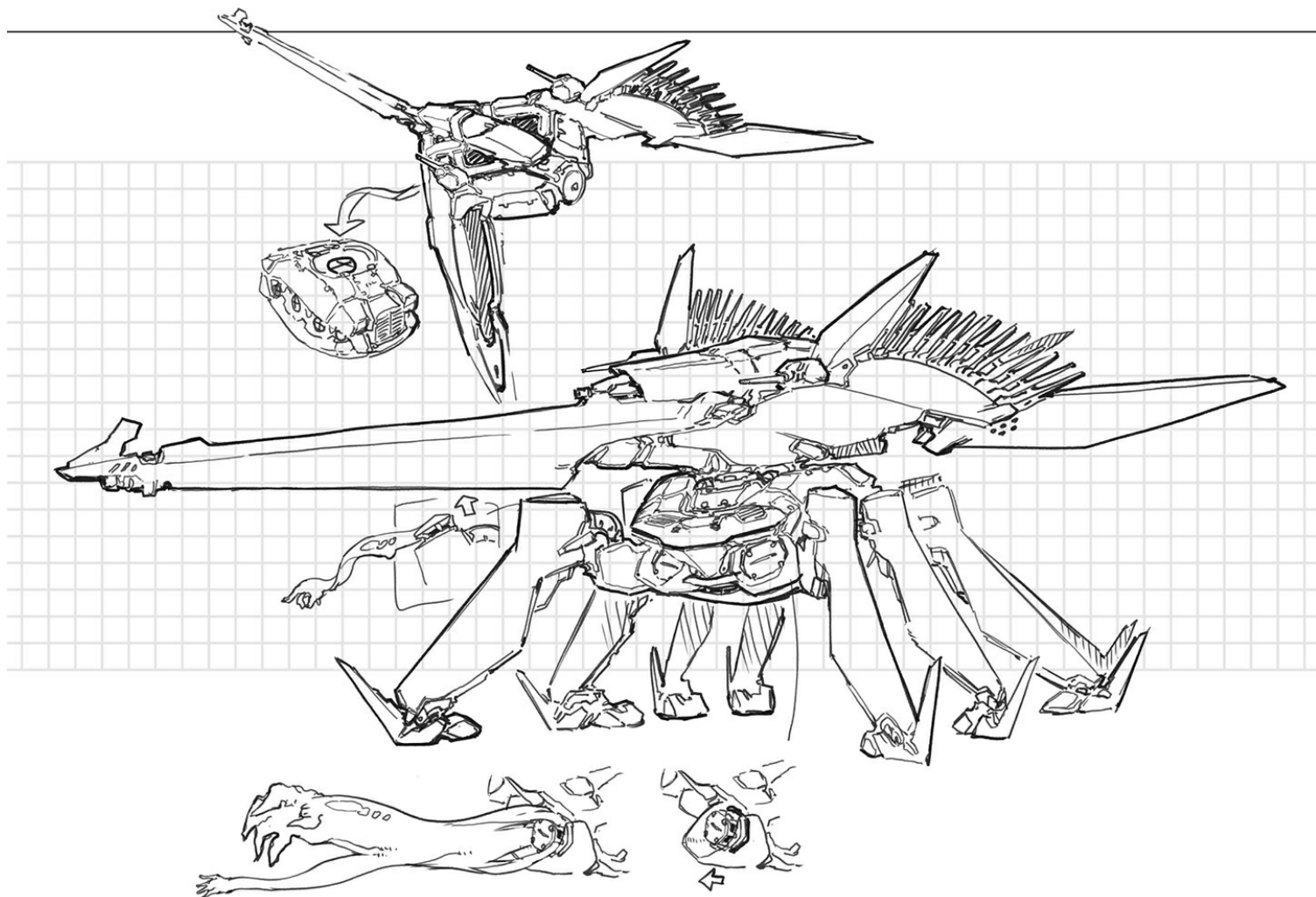
Shinn showed a faint smile. *So you showed up... finally, I'm right before you.*

That smile was like a blade of ice, maddening, sharp, and vicious.

“Found you — brother.”

# THE CAUTION DRONES

Forces of the <Legion> to be wary of



## (Dinosauria) Heavy Tank type

### [ A R M A M E N T ]

155mm Smoothbore Cannon x 1  
75mm Sub-cannon coaxial with the main cannon x 1  
12.7mm Heavy machine guns x 2

'NOTICE': Unlike the units Squad Spearhead had encountered, this unit has 'arms' made of unique nanomachines, other specifications unknown.

Name derived from 'dinosaur', of a completely different scale from the Löwe that are derived from lion, equipped with ferocious firepower and a terrifying massive frame. Main cannon caliber reaches 155mm, and can obliterate any target. Also, unlike the Löwe that can only turn slightly, this weakness is mitigated by the subarm. Weighs 100 tonnes (approximately 100 passenger cars) in total, and can crush anything it tramples upon.

## Chapter 10 - The Headless Knight IV

The snow fell silently.

The white snowflakes falling from the dark sky, piling on silently like looming despair, were so savagely beautiful, and yet so surreal. The harsh winter dying the world white froze his tears and lamentations.

Ray was lying inside the “Juggernaut,” its canopy ripped off as he looked at the sky, hoping to at least die while doing so. He quietly watched the white snowflakes dripping from the other end, gently falling upon him.

“...Shinn.”

Ray was ten when his brother was born. That was his little brother, a sibling he had so longed for.

His little brother always clung to their parents, and moreso him. This little brother loved to fawn around, and was a crybaby. Ray was always by his side, capable of anything, and always protecting him. Ray was a hero to his little brother.

When Ray was seventeen, war broke out. He, along with his parents and little brother, were no longer deemed human.

Threatened by their own country at gunpoint, they were crammed into trucks like livestock, and driven off.

Shinn kept crying in fear, and clung to Ray. The latter hugged his little brother. *I'll protect my little brother. No matter what happens. No matter who hurts him, I'm going to protect him.*

Their Concentration Camp was a shoddy army camp, with a production plant, and terrifying metal wires and landmines. That was all.

Once they were notified that they could regain citizenship if they served in the military, their father enlisted first. *At the very least, it's better to have you*

*all return home first*, so he said with a smile, and never returned.

His father died. Once notification of his death arrived, his mother completed the enlistment form.

The citizenship they should have received never came. The reply from the government was that since only one had served, only that one person would receive it. However, his mother had two children to protect.

Finally, his mother died. Upon receiving notice of her death, Ray received the enlistment form.

Ray stood alone in the room, his heart filled with enough rage to contort his vision. He was holding the enlistment form.

Easily renegaded upon was the promise of granting citizenship to families once a member had enlisted in the military.

To what extent was this government, this bunch of Albas, this world, willing to doom them?

*Why, why did I not stop mom, even when I started to realize it...!?*

“...Brother.”

It was Shinn.

*Don't come here. Go somewhere else. Just don't approach me. I'm not in the mood to be bothered with you.*

“Brother, where's mom?”

*Didn't I say so already? How many times do you want me to say this again?* He was utterly enraged by his little brother's foolishness.

“Why did mom die?”

A snap, and he sensed a taut rope in his heart break apart.

You.

It's all your fault.

He grabbed Shinn by the neck, slamming him onto the ground, and choked that slender neck. Break now. Break into pieces. Rage overwhelmed his mind as he yelled out, *This is all your fault.*

*Right, it's because of Shinn that mom died. Mom had to die because of someone like him, this stupid brother I have to protect, to have him be deemed human.* He yelled out the sins of his brother, feeling utterly relieved. Suffer this pain now. *When you can't take it anymore, die.*

“—What are you doing, Ray!?”

His shoulder was grabbed and pulled back, crashing hard onto the floor, before he finally regained his senses.

*What, did I, just do?*

In his hazy consciousness, he saw the priest's black robes move between them; he was checking on a completely lifeless Shinn. He extended his hands to Shinn's nostrils, touched his neck, and was alarmed, immediately beginning resuscitation.

“...Father...”

“Get out.”

He heard the priest mutter, and gave him a puzzled look. Shinn remained on the floor, motionless.

With his silver eyes, the priest glanced at the dumbfounded Ray, and lashed out.

“Do you want him to die!? Get out!”

There was some clear malice in those words.

Ray stumbled out of the room, and tumbled about, before collapsing onto the floor.

“Ah...”

The Albas, defeated in battle, oppressed the Eighty Sixers, and the Eighty

Sixers oppressed other Eighty Sixers weaker than them. This cycle of abuse was something Ray had always reviled. He despised those who could not endure or face the pain and injustice, and despicably vented on those weaker than them.

Yet he did the same thing.

His parents' death, the despicable acts of the Republic, the cruelty of the world, and his own helplessness. These factors left him unable to restrain his rising hatred and rage. Yet the one he vented on was his little brother who was much weaker than he was, the one he should have been protecting.

Once he noticed his own sin, he shivered in fear, cupped his head, and shriveled.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

*I should, have been, protecting him instead.*

Luckily, Shinn quickly regained his heartbeat and consciousness. Ray could not bring himself to meet Shinn though. The priest remained wary of Ray, and forbade them to meet. Also, Ray himself was terrified of seeing Shinn's face.

He submitted the enlistment form, as though he was trying to escape.

On the day of departure, the priest brought Shinn along to send Ray off. Ray could never say anything to Shinn however; he was heartbroken as he saw the terrified look directed at him.

*I can't die like this,* he anguished.

*I can't let myself die like this. I've got to return alive.*

So Ray thought as he vigorously fought, doing his best to survive, while all of his squadmates died off one after another.

However.

The falling snowflakes were freezing. *Is this the end for me?* so Ray thought in his mind, his brain having lost too much blood.

The personal mark on his twisted armor entered his eyes. It was a headless

skeleton knight, originating from the cover of a picture book. It was the protagonist of the story.

For some reason, that story seemed so strange to Ray. But for some reason, little Shinn was so curious about it.

*I wonder if he still remembers that picture book. The story I read for him every night?*

*I wonder if he still remembers that he was loved.*

Ray's face grimaced.

*If only I told him on that day I left.*

*If only I told him clearly, it's not your fault.*

That night, Ray cursed Shinn, and ran away without looking back.

After he was criticized for his family's death, Shinn reproached himself again in his heart.

To what extent would Shinn's heart be twisted, after he was nearly killed by the family that should have loved him?

Would he still cry because of his parents death? Because of what Ray did to him? Could he still smile again?

"...Shinn."

In his vision that was slowly becoming white and blurry, a heavy shadow appeared. *The <Legion>. They caught up?*

The skeleton knight remained in a corner of his eyes. It was a hero of justice who helped the poor and saved the weak, one who fought strong foes head on.

He wanted to become a hero who would protect his little brother.

And he had personally destroyed that image, yet he continued to reach his hands out, yearning to be reunited again.

Thus, "it" ended up in that form.

## Chapter 11 - Shalom Chaverim

“...*Shinn.*”

The armor of the Dinosauria rose slightly, extending an endless number of “arms.”

The arms were silver, comprised of nanomachines. The fingers were long, the joints massive, and they were the hands of an adult male. The arms transformed at a breathtaking speed, and extended several sizes beyond their original length. Some were left arms, some were right, and they were reaching out, seemingly yearning for something.

Every arm reached out for the “Undertaker,” as they were accompanied by a roaring boom,

*"Shhhhhiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!!"*

Even with synchronization at the lowest level, that bellow was deafening, throbbing their organs and curdling their blood. Raiden, the one most accustomed to this, was shivering in a cold sweat. Angel shrieked, and covered her ears.

Shinn in turn reacted as though he was called up, and turned the “Undertaker” towards the enemy unit.

“...Shinn!?”

*"Go ahead. Raiden, you'll be in command."*

Raiden could practically see his cold eyes staring intently at the Dinosauria before them.

*“Once you enter the forest, watch out for the Ameise, and you probably won’t be discovered. Break through, and continue on.”*

“What about you?”

*“Once I get rid of this guy, I’ll continue. We can’t continue if we don’t get rid of it, and I don’t want to continue... it doesn’t look like it’s going to let me off either.”*

Once he heard Shinn’s last words, Raiden felt a chill up his back.

*This guy, just,*

*Grinned.*

*Ahh. It’s hopeless.*

There was no turning back. This guy never thought of escape at all. All the time, he was looking, seeking the head of his dead brother that was taken by the enemy. It was likely that it all started from then... no, ever since he was nearly strangled to death by his brother.

Raiden knew very well. However, he hissed,

*“You’ve got to be kidding. Who’s going to obey you?”*

*Who’s going to obey this run away and leave me behind order?*

*“—”*

*“If you want to fight alone, fine by me... but we’ll block the other attacks for you. Finish that guy off.”*

Saying that, Raiden gritted his teeth, enduring the rising emotions.

*Fight alone, huh?*

*You could have told us. Just say that we’ll fight together, and we’ll agree to help out. Why is this idiot so... stupid at such a moment?*

After a short moment of silence, Shinn let out a little sigh.

*“...You’re idiots.”*

*“That makes all of us... don’t die.”*

This time, Shinn did not respond.

The shrill metal cries of the long-distance cannons marked the start of the battle. The volley rained down like the wind, and the four units quickly retreated.

The four-legged spider carrying the skeletal death god immediately dashed forward, like a beast aiming for its prey.

The Dinosauria began its plan.

The Ameise waiting by the side began moving everywhere. The other <Legion> units had weak sensors, and thus a massive number of Ameise, having sacrificed their offensive potency, acted as a data link that conveyed intel about the enemy. The Dinosauria's objective was to have the Ameise all over the battlefield. Two of them caught sight of the approaching "Undertaker" and conveyed the various pieces of data back to the Dinosauria. The latter combined the data with the optical images captured in its unit, and turned its cannons towards them.

Fire.

The 155mm cannons boomed. These cannons were not tank cannons, but heavy cannons. The armor piercing rounds broke the sound barrier, flying in at high speeds, and smashed hard into the space the "Undertaker" was at.

The "Undertaker" immediately fought back, not aiming for the Dinosauria, but at the surrounding scattered Ameise. It took one down and evaded, kicking at the body of a second unit, before taking aim and firing at the Dinosauria again. The smoke grenade exploded in the air, temporarily masking the optical sensors of the Dinosauria, and the "Undertaker" seized the moment to duck into the blind spot of the two destroyed Ameise.

The main cannon of the "Juggernaut" was a 57mm cannon, completely incomparable to the Dinosauria's, and its firepower was unable to pierce the latter's sturdy armor, no matter the angle. There was only one effective spot, and to approach it, there was a need to destroy the exterior eyes covering the blind spots of the massive enemy, and increase the chances of success.

The massive body of the Dinosauria blew aside the veil of white smoke, and leaped up. It predicted the approach pattern of the "Undertaker," and raised its heavy machine gun, took aim, and spewed a trail of fire. The "Undertaker" quickly ducked back to evade, and the smoke between them scattered.

The sizzling hot muzzles of the cannon were aimed at the headless figure. While the enemy continued to aim with some godlike precision, the “Undertaker” continued to race forth with movements of a man possessed.

The <Legion> had obviously planned to have the “Undertaker” isolated from the other four units, and then isolate the four units before finishing them off.

Several Grauwolf and Löwe moved towards their targets, and even if they were to hide, they would be discovered by the Ameise scattered all over the battlefield. All possible routes of retreat were sealed by the Stiers, and the long-ranged bombardments of the Scorpions greatly limited their possible routes of retreat. They defeated the <Legion> next to them, but more enemies continued to assault them.

Typically speaking, the <Legion> would never use such a clustered formation as a tactic. Clearly this was commanded by a “Shepherd,” the “Shepherd” that was most likely inside that Dinosauria.

Amidst the maddening assaults, volleys, and slashes, Raiden glanced towards that side. The <Legion> continued to swarm like ants, but that side remained clear as the Dinosauria and the “Undertaker” took each other on.

It was an utterly ridiculous scene.

Fighting that Dinosauria alone was completely preposterous. Whatever that was happening before his eyes was a miracle. The “Juggernaut” was far inferior, whether it was in terms of firepower, armor, or mobility.

This should have been no contest. Yet this battle could continue because the one riding in that “Juggernaut” was Shinn... no, even Shinn could not make it a real battle. The Dinosauria pretty much ignored all definitions of a heavy tank as it remained still. In contrast, the “Undertaker” continued to dance and slash its way around in a delicate, yet barbaric manner, one that would make one’s guts wince, yet it was forced to continue this unbelievable chain of movements.

It was not a battle. How long could the tightrope walking continue?

*Or will we be the ones to fall first?*

Raiden's heart faltered. He could no longer remember how many enemies he had dealt with, for every time he got rid of one, another would appear. Fatigue and futility were setting in on the battle-hardened veterans.

*"Reloading! Cover me!"*

Seo panted as he yelled. That voice was clearly filled with fatigue.

Fido darted through the fire alone, doing its utmost to resupply the various units, and had ejected one of its six containers. This clearly meant that the ammunition in the container was depleted. Of the one month's worth of ammunition, 20% was depleted in this battle alone.

Once we run out of ammunition, that'll be our demise, huh?

Thinking about this, Raiden gave a wry smile. Marvelous. This was the life he had hoped for, and the death he had hoped for.

Suddenly, another person joined in the synchronized channel.

*"Lieutenant Shuga! Lend me your left eye!"*

In an instant, his left eye darkened, before it recovered again. The same voice continued to shout,

*"Firing now! Prepare for impact!"*

At the same moment, the sky suddenly cleared.

A silent flash was followed by a delayed explosion. The Eintagsfliege deployed in the air were instantly burned away and vaporized by the flames, or shattered by the shockwaves that spread everywhere else, crumbling apart.

Those were the flames and energy released in the explosion of a fuel type shell. The silver clouds dispersed momentarily, revealing a temporal blue sky, before being colored black due to the barrage that followed.

The missiles landed accurately above their targets, and as their fuses burned, these missile shells cracked apart. The hundreds of bullets within sought out the coordinates of the enemy units as per radar detection, exploding at a

supersonic initial velocity of 2500 to 3000 meters per second.

In the torrent of steel, the feeble armor of the Ameise broke apart, and the first half of the <Legion's> second wave was instantly silenced. A second wave of barrage followed immediately as steel rained upon the remnants of the second wave, obliterating them.

Raiden, Seo, Krena, and Angel were momentarily stunned.

They had never seen it before, but they understood. It was an interception cannon, standing behind the line guarded by the "Juggernauts" like a hedgehog, a piece of scrap metal that was never used for its purpose.

And someone had actually activated it.

There was only one weirdo who was willing to work hard for these people on death row.

"Major Millize, is that you!?"

Answering him was a silver bell-like voice, filled with some determined, ruthless conviction.

*"Yes. It is me. Sorry for being late, squad."*



“I told you not to show up before me again, Lena.”

Lena was worried that Arnett would not show up, but the latter did show up at the hall, right on time.

“Yes, I heard that, Arnett. But I never said that I would comply.”

It was a drizzling night. Lena stood at the intersection between the light of the entrance and the darkness of the night, her face clearly fatigued and weary like a ghost. She was dressed in a flimsy military uniform, her silvery hair messily combed, her snowy white face devoid of any make up.

The adamant silver eyes were giving off a strange glint from deep within.

“Visual synchronization settings. RAID device adjustments. You can do that, right?”

Arnett groaned. She had the eyes of a defeated hound.

“Not doing that, and it has nothing to do with me.”

“You will. Get to work.”

Lena chuckled.

*I guess my face is looking really cruel and ugly now*, so she thought somewhere in a corner of her mind.

“That childhood friend of yours that you left for dead.”

She chuckled. Like a devil. Like a death god.

“His name is Shinn, right?”

At that moment, Arnett’s expression changed.

“...How did you...!?”

Once she saw the pale look on the girl’s face, *I guessed so*, Lena quietly remarked.

Though Lena was trying to lure this out of her, she was somewhat confident to begin with. He had once lived in the first area, where Colorata were few in numbers, was of a similar age to Lena and Arnett, and had an older brother.

Shinn's ability allowed him to hear the voices of the dead for some reason, while Arnett's childhood friend could hear the hearts of others. It was likely both of them were similar in nature, just different in the type of hearing.

Given the many clues, a conclusion could be easily derived.

"How do you know that name...!? Is he—!"

"Right, he is in the squadron I am commanding. Leader of Spearhead Squadron, codenamed 'Undertaker.' That is Shinn."

Again, she had a chance to save him, but again, Arnett had abandoned him.

Arnett grabbed Lena's collar. The latter remained unfazed by her anxious actions and eyes, not flinching in the slightest.

"Did Shinn tell you that!? I-Is he still alive!? D-Does he still hate me!?"

"Why ask me? Doesn't it not have anything to do with you?"

Lena waved off Arnett's hand, and slowly retreated. Ignoring the rain on her clothes, Arnett continued forward, and Lena showed a chilling smirk as Arnett's face showed a darkened look.

Lena never heard Shinn mention anything about Arnett... it was likely that he had forgotten all about her. He, whose memories of Ray and his parents were swept aside by the battlefield and the voices of the ghosts, surely would be unable to remember his childhood friend.

As for whether it was a redemption or a curse for Arnett, Lena could not tell.

"If it has something to do with you, help me. What do you intend to do? — Hurry, before the rooster crows."

Before that happens, you might reject me a third time.

Arnett remained rooted, smiling. That smile was mixed with tears, and a tinge of relief.

"...A devil."

"Well put, **Technical Captain Penrose**. That goes for me, and you."

Yes, Lena was not dismayed nor disheartened in the slightest. She was simply too busy to be synchronized with the rest of Spearhead Squadron.

She was looking for everything she could do that would be of assistance, whether it was the visual synchronization setting and adjustment, or the firing activation codes of the interception cannons in the neighboring battle zones.

“...Half of them cannot be fired...!?”

Once she saw this, Lena groaned. 30% of the cannons could not be fired, and of the rest, another 30% could not light the fuse, so their rounds could only plummet and bounce. The missiles, weighing more than a hundred kilograms, landed heavily on the unlucky Ameise units, crushing them, but they were utterly ineffective given the firepower they should have.

The maintenance crew had actually become so lax. They did not maintain the armor that was protecting them, and it was utterly foolish of them.

She entered similar coordinates into the remaining interception cannon, and fired. Once she saw that the targeted enemy units were all wiped out, she heaved a sigh of relief.

Back then, Shinn said that they were finally free.

Lena did not think that could be considered freedom, but she could not retract the mission, and could not give them the pardon they deserved. At the very least, she wanted to ensure that their long-awaited journey to freedom would not be too obstructed, that they could continue on as far as they could.

This freedom they had attained was so rare, so valuable.

She would never allow the first day of their long journey be the last, and not have their destination be at her doorstep.

Upon hearing that silver bell-like voice, Raiden lashed out. The second wave off the enemy was wiped out, and the third wave ceased advance, stunned by the sudden situation. The first wave lost support, and everyone attacked at once.

“You’re really an idiot, aren’t you!? What are you doing!?”

*"I simply synchronized with your left eye, checked the location, and fired the interception cannon there. Oh, I had my left eye closed during the synchronized sight so that you would not be distracted."*

Once he heard her nonchalant reply, he was increasingly enraged. *What do you mean simply? How's that simple in any way!?*

*"Don't you know that synchronized visuals can cause a Handler to go blind!? And where did you get the authority to fire the intercepting cannons!? You're already defying military orders there, aren't you!?"*

The information shared through the visual synchronization was overly massive, and could easily cause both sides to be confused, so much so that if synchronized for too long, the brain would be overburdened, and in the worst case scenario, it would result in blindness of the eyes. Thus, Handlers would typically not share synchronized vision. The directive for this mission clearly stated that any support was forbidden, yet this superior of theirs provided automated fire support without permission. Her actions were not worth it for a squadron put on death row!

Suddenly, Lena shouted. It was the first time he had heard the girl lash out.

*"So what! Everyone can go blind anyway. Even though I may be defying orders and providing support using the interception cannons, I will only lose my rank and pay. Not that I will die here!"*

Raiden was flabbergasted by this outburst. She was panting hard due to the sudden agitation, and spoke with a cold voice he could never have imagined from her.

*"The military, the government, none of them are reasonable, so I do not have to listen to their reasons, nor do I have to bother with their reprimands... I should not have waited for any orders and gone ahead to begin with."*

The hissing was filled with bitterness, and then, she proudly snorted.

This tension between them finally eased up, and Raiden gave a little bitter grin.

*"...You're really an idiot."*

*“Not that I am doing this for you. With so many enemies, the Republic will be endangered if they break through. I am doing this because I do not want to die.”*

She flatly stated such, and Raiden laughed out loud. And so, Lena smiled for the first time on this day.

*“If the third wave begins to advance, I will be attacking. Sorry that I cannot support you since the first wave is so close to you. Please figure something out.”*

“Right, leave it to us. This is just business as usual.”

*“...What about Captain Nouzen?”*

Upon hearing that name, Raiden winced bitterly. Though they were synchronized, Shinn never answered, nor did he pay them any mind, merely giving off a cold, heinous will to fight.

“Duking it out with his brother. That’s what Shinn’s really aiming for. He can’t hear us anymore.”

Amidst the deafening howls of his brother, Shinn continued to pilot the “Juggernaut,” seeking a chance for counterattack.

As he continued to battle on a tightrope, where even the slightest mistake would be punished, his concentration was focused entirely on the enemy before him, so much that the surrounding scenery, the countless shouts, and even the passing of time was all but neglected.

The cannon took aim. It fired. The “Undertaker” deliberately slid, breaking its balance, and evaded the cannon by mere inches. The sub cannon was to the right of the main cannon, and if he continued to dodge to the left, the enemy could only attack with the main cannon and the turrets at the top...

But the **sub cannon** fired.

The shot grazed past the right leg. At the same time, the main cannon took aim. The “Undertaker” unit continued to skid to the side, and was unable to evade in time.

Another shot. With the assistance of the grappling hook shot into the ground, the “Undertaker” barely managed to avoid the shot, and the Löwe positioned

right behind was hit, and exploded. Due to the consecutive shots, even the Dinosauria with its massive weight and sturdy legs had to grapple the ground with its eight legs to withstand the tremendous recoil.

Seizing this moment, the “Undertaker” quickly darted before it.

It had its main cannon aimed behind of the Dinosauria’s turrets. It was visibly the weakest part of the armor, the only part of the impregnable armor that the “Juggernaut’s” main cannon could penetrate.

He squeezed the trigger. The armor-piercing round flew in an arc, preparing to deal a fatal blow.

However, an arm extended from the Dinosauria, deflecting the grenade.

“...!?”

Shinn widened his eyes as he witnessed this nightmarish scene. The extended arm got hit by the grenade, and shattered, but as it was made of nanomachines, new fingers grew immediately, and they swayed again, as though nothing had happened.

He sensed the Dinosauria direct its consciousness upon him again, and instinctively retreated. At the same time, the bullets of the spinning machine guns pelted upon him, so he retreated again, again, and again until he pulled far enough away. The weapons of weakest firepower the enemy had, the machine guns, were enough to force the “Juggernaut” to retreat. The massive Dinosauria slowly turned around.

The enemy was shooting to fend him off, and he had to do his best to evade. Also, his final possible attack point was sealed off.

While he was shivering, his lips showed a smile.

A Grauwolf seized the opportunity to attack as it broke free from its squad and approached from the flank. However, the Dinosauria cruelly blasted it apart, basically growling for no interference. Seeing this, Shinn’s smile got wider.

The dying voice of his brother lingered in his eardrums. *Sin. Your name. How fitting. It’s all your fault. Repay with your life.*

*So even when dead, you want to personally kill me?*

*...Same here, brother.*

For Ray at this point, whether he should be called the ghost of Shourei Nouzen or a member of the <Legion> whose memory was replicated from his brain that had yet to rot on that snowy day, it did not matter. He had died, yet he had obtained a second chance. That was all fine to him.

He knew Shinn had arrived on the battlefield. He heard that voice.

Shinn's voice, however, was soft, covered by the massive, ugly skeleton called the Republic. The Republic shamelessly dumped Shinn into the battlefield like a personal property, which left him unable to distinguish Shinn's voice from the rest.

Whenever it was deployed to a certain battle, it would search using the eyes of its Ameise. Ray, as a member of the <Legion>, was unable to defy its given directives, and as commander, could not leave the inside of his assigned zone. However, if Shinn was nearby, it wanted to meet him again. To see him, to apologize to him, and to beg for his forgiveness. At this moment.

One day, through the eyes of an Ameise that was wrecked and unable to move, it saw him.

It was a night filled with meteor showers. Though the distance was too far away, it was finally able to see his face after enlarging the visual to maximum.

He was all grown up, and probably saying something to his friend, an Eisen. It wanted to hear his voice, and directed the receiver towards them. Surely his voice must have broke. Or not at all. In any case, it wanted to hear that voice.

Both of them were looking up at the night sky as the meteor shower glided back, resting on a "Juggernaut" that was all curled up, their silhouettes resembling children.

"Your brother's still around?"

"Yeah. He's always calling for me. That's why I have to go."

*Talking about me? Are you looking for me?*

The machine kept shaking. It was sad to see Shinn step onto the battlefield, but once it knew he was seeking it, it could not hide its delight.

“But are you not going to find your brother’s corpse and bury it? That should be enough, isn’t it?”

Ohh, bury my corpse? How kind of you, Shinn.

“...Brother’s not going to forgive me just for that.”

It was stunned.

*Why do you say that? If you cannot be forgiven, that goes for me too, right?*

*No, that is not true,* it wanted to tell him, that it was not true. It wanted to see him, the desire driving it mad.

The Republic’s carrier quickly deported Shinn along with the others, and his brother’s feeble voice was mixed in amongst the noise. It continued to search, and whenever it found him, it got excited. Ray could not leave its area, but it deployed all the <Legion> units it could.

Shinn kept fighting.

Even though he knew that he would be buried alone in a corner of the battlefield, he continued to fight with ease.

*There is no need to fight.*

There was no need to fight for those swine. If those swine could only do that to survive, it might be better to bring Shinn over to its side. Shinn could leave the fragile exterior exoskeleton of a human, and change his body easily. Surely it could protect him, protect him, for eternity.

On this day, the swine had finally lifted their filthy hands from Shinn. Amidst the voices within the noise, his feeble voice remained distinguishable.

Ray knew that Shinn was headed towards it, and went to welcome it. Finally, it could take action.

At this moment, he was right before it. Its beloved brother, whom it had beckoned for years, and anxiously awaited, was in that ugly spider.

That spider’s armor was too fragile, and it had to be careful not to destroy

that spider. It raised its arms forth, and the spider was quick, hard to capture, so it only aimed for the legs.

*Finally, I get to meet you. Finally, I get to bring you back.*

*We shall be together, forever. Brother shall always protect you. So, come here, Shinn.*

The Dinosauria was aiming only for the legs, not using grenades, only armor piercing rounds. The grenades' explosions would create shrapnel flying at blinding speeds in unpredictable directions, and the "Juggernaut's" shoddy armor could not withstand the blast of a 155mm cannon from up close.

*Is he messing with me? Or is he not willing to kill me off immediately?* The countless arms, the arms that tried to kill him on that night, were weaving about erratically.

*You think this will happen again?*

Shinn glanced at the optical screen, searching for terrain he could fight on. He feinted a retreat, and saw that Ray gave pursuit.

He darted horizontally, as he retreated. The cannons tailed his movements as they anxiously swayed left and right, trying to aim for the legs. They locked on, and the moment they were about to fire—

He came to the planned location.

Moments before the cannon unleashed a flash, Shinn shot his grappling hook, aiming for a massive tree to the left, behind the Dinosauria. The next moment, he retracted the grappling rope, kicked off the branches and twig, and immediately leaped over the top of the Dinosauria.

The turret of the Dinosauria was mainly to attack ground-based armor units, and though it could turn to an angle above, there was a limit to its peripheral angle. It could not attack anywhere directly above, and could not hit anything right beneath its feet.

Shinn glided in the air, and at the same time, adjusted to where the enemy unit would be. He stomped on an armor joint, and landed right behind the

Dinosauria. The turrets could not hit that position as it was overly massive, and compared to the front side, the armor was a little thinner. Shinn swung the high frequency blades used for closed combat, and stabbed it deep into the armor.

Sparks flew, and the thick armor was severed like liquid. The frequency blades pried a massive hole, and after which, he aimed the main cannon at it.

However, two silver arms extended out from that hole, tightly grappling the armaments.

“Wha—”

And, as a repeated of what happened that night in the Church.

He was raised up and then slammed down hard into the ground. At that moment, Shinn lost consciousness.

Pzzt. The synchronization with Shinn was severed. Raiden immediately widened his eyes. The surrounding <Legion> were more or less wiped out, and Fido discarded the second container. The <Legion> surging forth from the back began to retreat due to the bombardments Lena unleashed upon them. At this moment,

“...Shinn!?”

The latter’s signal was lost, and he tried to connect again, but failed. Looking over, he saw the “Undertaker” collapsed unnaturally before the Dinosauria, motionless, probably knocked aside.

The Para-RAID required an awake consciousness on both sides, so if any side was to pass out, the synchronization would not happen. This showed that Shinn was probably asleep, or unconscious — or even dead.

The Dinosauria loomed slowly. For some reason, it did not attack, but the more it approached, the more ominous it seemed.

Raiden switched the wireless communicator, and luckily, he got through. It seemed the cockpit was not damaged badly.

“Shinn, you idiot! Get up!”

But the “Undertaker” remained motionless.

It did its best to control its strength and not damage the cockpit, but the armaments of the fragile “Juggernaut” could not withstand this impact, and Shinn, whom it managed to catch after much effort, flew away again.

Seeing Shinn motionless, it heaved a sigh of relief. He was probably passed out, probably injured. In any case, it probably had to apologize afterwards.

Suppressing the agitation in its heart, it approached it slowly. Finally, it could bring him to its side.

Finally, it could bring back what it had lost. Finally, they could be together. Thus, first, he had to discard that feeble body of flesh.

Once she saw the Dinosauria on the radar slowly closing in on the “Undertaker,” Lena bit her lips. Raiden and the others gave pursuit, but their armaments alone would be unable to stop it. Surely, if this kept up, Shinn, and even Raiden and the others, would die.

She bit her lips so hard, she could taste blood.

Back then, Ray said that he wanted to return. He did not say how much he doted on his little brother, but his expression revealed everything. However, why did that Ray want to kill Shinn so much?

Lena wanted to stop Ray, but she was out of ideas. There was an extremely potent weapon in her hands, but she could not use it to attack the Dinosauria without hurting Shinn.

The power of the guided missiles, or the cannon, would be too much. The armor of a “Juggernaut” was exceptionally fragile, and if it did hit the Dinosauria, the shrapnel from the explosion would clearly hurt Shinn.

*What do I do? Is there really nothing I can do?*

*Think, think, quick, think.* —Suddenly, a memory flashed by, and Lena widened her eyes.

*“Lieutenant Cucumila, please give me the coordinates of the Dinosauria. The more precise it is, the better.”*

Krena nearly jolted once she heard Lena’s orders. As a sniper, she immediately knew what Lena was planning.

*“I shall leave the probing beacon to you. Just have the laser primed on the target...”*

“W-Wait a moment! Are you...!?”

And then, Seo interrupted. Everyone was riled up. Even Angel joined in, feeling anxious.

*“Are you really going to fire!? You’ve got to be kidding! That Shinn’s still there!”*

*“With an explosion nearby, there is no way the ‘Juggernaut’ can withstand the blast! Shinn will surely be caught in the blast!”*

*“I have an idea. However, I guess it can only create an opening... I do not want the Captain to die either.”*

Her voice was filled with honesty and determination.

And Krena unwittingly nodded.

Raiden caught up and fired, while Seo and Angel too continued on. The armor deflected their bullets, but they continued to fire. At the same time, they kept firing at the surrounding Ameise, continuing their fierce attacks.

Everything was deflected by the armor, or parried away by the arms, as the Dinosauria showed no intentions of stopping in its track. *Damn it, these two brothers really are the same, not caring about anything around them.*

A machine gun was disabled by shrapnel, as a cannon blast on the optical sensor exploded before his eyes.

Finally, the Dinosauria directed its attention towards them.

The remaining machine gun turret turned around impatiently. Raiden saw it

move, and evaded to the side. The sweeping volley of bullets whizzed right by him.

Seo and Angel seized the opportunity to approach, and fired their grappling hooks onto the Dinosauria's cannon and leg respectively, before stomping hard off the ground. The weight of the "Juggernaut" was only a tenth that of the Dinosauria's, and even with two units, they were not enough to take it down. Raiden fired a grenade with a timed fuse in an arch, disabling the remaining gun, and then followed up with a grappling hook to latch onto the Dinosauria. The massive machine finally slowed down slightly.

A strong killing intent he had never sensed before came right at them, and the trio immediately loosened the wires. The next moment, the Dinosauria swung hard at the cannon and limbs that were latched onto. The "Snow Witch" was a tad too late, and was pelted into the air, slamming hard into "Laughing Fox," who too was sent flying far away.

"Angel! Seo!"

*"I-I'm fine."*

*"Same here. Sorry, Seo."*

*"It's fine. Now... Raiden! It's coming for you!"*

*"...!"*

While he was momentarily distracted, the enemy aimed at him. Raiden could not evade in time. The moment he gritted his teeth, he saw the body of the Dinosauria sink hard. The cannon shot came from far behind the "Werewolf." It was a snipe by Krena. She blew a hole in the ground under the feet of the Dinosauria.

*"Raiden, are you okay?"*

"Yeah, saved me there! Retreat first though. We're doomed if you're finished here... Major, you alright!?"

Lena's voice was filled with tension.

*"I have launched it. Distance to landing... 3000! Lieutenant Cucumila!"*

*"Roger that. Preparing probing beacon. ETA to target is... five seconds... three,*

two...”

The “Gunslinger” was aiming with a laser probe invisible to the naked eye. It was pointed right at the Dinosauria stopping right before the “Undertaker.”

The Dinosauria had weak sensors.

Even as a commanding unit, Ray was no exception, and could only compensate for this handicap using the numerous Ameise by its side and the armies it commanded. However, the Ameise were utterly annihilated, and he had never given orders to his forces except for the beginning of the operation, resulting in them being beaten back. For it, taking back Shinn’s head was its primary goal, and the rest were secondary, which it paid no mind to.

And thus, the moment it realized what was going on, it was too late.

It was about to pry the cockpit open, before an alert signalling lock on rang without warning.

On the optical sensors that popped out, there was a massive cannon round that was right before its eyes. It was akin to a baby-sized maggot, deploying its control wings as it flew in at forty-five degrees, aiming right for the armor.

A 155mm heavy cannon, with a piercing round.

Rage boiled within it.

Of course. It was a massive, powerful cannon round, so much so that if it were to hit, even Ray could not remain unscathed.

*Those Republican bastards. It’s not enough that they’re discarding him, they’re using him as bait to kill us all?*

Ray could not escape with Shinn in time. Thus, it stomped its front legs, and raised its upper body like a horse that was reined in, trying to block the incoming round with the sturdiest front armor, and deployed all of its nanomachines to form countless arms before it. *If the weak armor on top could not withstand it, how about the front? I’ll block everything, the blast, the impact. I’m going to protect Shinn behind me no matter what!*

The cannon round was right before it, and it would hit at the next moment.

Suddenly, he recalled the countless stars he saw, as though countless pixies were muttering in the night.

And beneath the sky, a girl spoke. She had silver hair and eyes, and was of similar age as Shinn. He had met her before.

*“Do you want to protect him?”*

Ahh, yes. I have to protect Shinn. He’s my beloved little brother.

The girl then said,

***“And you are going to kill him again?”***

-----  
-----

The “Juggernaut” remained motionless. Little Shinn did not move.

*Again.*

*I.*

Impact.

Upon contact, the probe, did not explode.

It was a dud.

Given the materials used, the probing beacon filled with explosives would never be able to break through the thick frontal armor of the Dinosauria, even with velocity or density. The shot was quashed, and as the probe did not activate, the explosives would not explode.

But given the supersonic speed and the material quality that was far superior to a tank shell, the tremendous impact it carried seeped into every corner of Ray’s body.

“Right on target.”

Lena saw the probing beacon indicated on the radar, overlapping with the Dinosauria before vanishing.

It did not explode. Of course. Lena deliberately made sure not to arm it.

She once heard her father say.

That the armor of a tank could deflect bullets. However, it did not mean that the tank was not damaged in any way.

That as long as it was hit, some kinetic energy from the round would spread through the tank. This energy would be enough to loosen the parts of the body, knock down the passengers, or if the armor was fused together through nails or screws, these nails or screws would bounce out due to the contorted armor, even bouncing inside like bullets, killing the passengers.

But for the Dinosauria, it was probably just a mere scratch. For Lena, given her weapons, this was her only choice if she wanted to attack it without hurting Shinn.

At the very least, she had bought a few seconds. She prayed that everyone could use this short time to create some change.

Suddenly, she noticed.

There was an additional person in the synchronized channel.

Raiden had been trying to connect to Shinn while in combat. He too noticed that Shinn had woken up.

“Shinn!”

The latter’s reaction was slow. It seemed he was still groggy. Raiden called out again, but there was no response.

And so, he yelled,

“Get up, you idiot! Hey Shinn!!”

“Captain Nouzen! Do you copy, Captain Nouzen!? Please wake up!”

Lena heard everyone else in the squadron call out, and she too shouted. *Wake up, get away from there, finish off the Dinosauria.* However, she did not ask him to do so for those reasons.

She knew. She noticed. Thus, she had to have him finish his mission.

That moment, that night, he swore that he would beat his brother with much heartbreaking conviction.

Shinn was not willing to fight his older brother, but he stood before the latter, and the reason for their faceoff was.

“You want to hang your brother, right!? —Shinn!”

A twitch.

The red eyes seemed to have opened slightly.

The body of steel stumbled back greatly, and crumpled onto the ground. With the impact reverberating through greatly, the CPU malfunctioned, resulting in a temporary blank.

However, the instincts of a combat machine caused it to wildly fire its cannons at its surroundings. He could sense the flies flying around it.

The CPU and the sensors recovered.

And so, Ray saw it.

Behind him, the “Undertaker” had finally stood up, raising its cannon right back at it.

It seemed Shinn was injured the moment he lost consciousness, for blood remained glued to his left eye, and he had difficulty opening it. He felt that his body was so far away, his limbs would no longer obey him. His mind was still groggy, and he was unable to think properly.

The sub screen was down, and in the dim cockpit, he raised his left hand, touching his still dizzy head, leaning on the inner wall, not getting up, just

holding the joystick and staring at the main screen.

Someone called out for him, and he opened his eyes, but the pain and damage would not disperse. He did not know what had happened, he did not know why he remained alive, nor did he know what was going on around him.

But Shinn and the “Undertaker” were not dead.

And the brother he wanted to personally bury was before his eyes.

In his blurry consciousness, his body moved instinctively, and he held onto the joysticks again, priming his finger on the trigger.

That was enough.

“...Shinn.”

It was the ghost’s voice, the voice of his dead brother. Just like the last words he had heard, it was the voice of his brother, who was alone somewhere on this battlefield, still unwilling to forgive him even in death.

The moment he heard that voice amongst the groans of the ghosts, he decided that he was going to find his brother, and bury him personally.

“...Shinn.”

Before he knew it, Shinn gritted his teeth. He, who should have been strangled to death at the age of seven, was silently weeping in a corner of his heart, wailing, saying that he should have died, that it was all his fault. His brother’s voice continued to coax him, saying it was never too late to do it. *Your brother will never let you forget... will never forgive you, ever.*

However, Shinn was no longer a child. He would never let it happen to him again.

An ample amount of time had passed since then, and he knew more than enough, and already understood what happened.

Back then, when he was nearly choked to death, that was not his fault.

His parents’ death, his brother’s death, everything was not his fault.

That was just his brother venting frustrations upon him. Back then, his brother could not take it anymore, and found him, who was much weaker, to

be someone to lash out at. That was simply all it was.

He had no sin to bear.

*“Shinn.”*

The ghost continued to call out.

That voice kept on calling, but Shinn did not think it was scary. It was simply a tragic thing. It was a machine that borrowed the words of the dead, or some fragmented words it eavesdropped upon, and yearned to have some place to return to.

The countless ghosts lost their country, their bodies, and though dead, could not return to the place they should be headed towards, merely repeating their desire to return, using the wailings of the dead who did not want to die.

He could not bring himself to leave his brother there, nor move on from there.

His brother was killed, and after his death, his head was extract, sealed in a combat machine like a ghost, moaning over and over again to be returned to the ground. Shinn had to find him, face off against him, fight, defeat, and bury him.

For this reason, Shinn stood on the battlefield. For this reason, Shinn fought for five full years.

It was not the debt he should bear. It was not the sin he should seek redemption for.

He knew that well. But even so,

At the very end, his brother cursed him with a sin. Till the very end, the ghost of his dead brother kept calling for him.

Without this redemption, Shinn could not move on.

The reticule took aim. The cannon was aimed at an opened gap in the steel-colored armor.

*“...Farewell, brother.”*

He squeezed the trigger.

Through the optical sensors at the back of the unit, Ray witnessed everything.

The trigger was squeezed, and a spark appeared.

For some reason, at that moment, he saw it.

The bloody red eyes were staring right at him, filled with strong conviction and will.

That face, that expression, they were all too foreign to him.

But that was obvious.

Five years ago, Ray died. It died, and since then, it never changed, and never grew up.

But Shinn remained alive. He lived on, and thus, he could continue to grow, venturing into unknown lands.

The weak little brother it swore to protect was no longer around.

Sooner or later, one day, Shinn would be older than it was. Though elated, Ray was a little forlorn.

Ahh, of course.

There were those last words, just those words it wanted to say.

The words it wanted to convey, but never could bring itself to say. The words it wanted to say before its death, in the dumps on that snowy night, but could never do so.

Just like before, it reached its hand out. A hand reached out from a gap in the armor, and it seemed something passed through.

*Shinn.*

A flash.

The canopy of his cockpit flapped up, and during this time, a gap appeared. From that gap, flowing nanomachine seeped through, forming an arm.

In fact, there was less than a second between the trigger to the hit. The hand

however continued to extend for an immeasurable amount of time, slowly, steadily reaching forth. His brother's massive hand opened slightly, seemingly seeking something.

Shinn recalled that night, and instinctively shivered. However, he quickly gritted his teeth, lifted his head up high, and stared at the hand before him, not flinching in the slightest.

The next moment, his brother would be burned to bits due to the cannon. For five years, he sought his brother, or to be precise, the lingering thoughts of his brother before the latter's death. He wanted to etch this scene in his mind.

Whether it was malice or an urge to kill, he wanted to remember, even though he had no intention of bearing it.

The hand touched his neck, wrapping itself around his scarf. It resembled the hand that had tried to kill him, yet it tenderly, sadly stroked the ugly scar it had once left behind.

*"...I'm sorry."*

At that moment, he widened his eyes. The flow of time resumed as normal.

The next moment, the cannon shell hit the machine, and the explosives contained within shattered. The metal was deformed by the high temperatures and high speeds, the armor cracking from within as a result. The next moment, the massive body of the Dinosauria oozed out dark red flames.

His brother's hand let go, seeping out through the gap of the cockpit, and back into the burning flames.

*"Bro..."*

He unwittingly reached his hand out, but could not catch it in time. His brother's hand retreated, and was devoured by the flames, burning away, so all he was grasping was a fleeting scenery that vanished in the flames, and everything seemed blurred.

*"...ther."*

Something slid down his cheeks. For a moment, Shinn did not realize what it was. Ever since he was killed by Ray, Shinn had never cried.

He did not know why he was sad, and neither could he comprehend that the feelings rising from the bottom of his heart were called anguish.

All he knew was that tears were coming out, and that he could not control himself.

“—Major. Disconnect please... that guy probably doesn't want anyone to see him like this.”

*“Yes.”*

A moment later, Raiden connected, saying it was fine, so Lena activated her Para-RAID too. The others were done, and Raiden spoke up for everyone.

*“Feeling better?”*

*“Yeah.”*

Shinn's reply remained hoarse, but it seemed he was no longer crying, back to his usual calmness, albeit with something else broken. With a chuckle, Raiden said,

*“Now you can leave your brother's name here.”*

In response to that, Shinn quietly, but clearly, smiled,

*“I suppose.”*

And he directed his consciousness aside,

*“...Major.”*

“I am here. Of course I am. I am the Handler of Spearhead Squadron after all.”

She wanted to see them off through the very end. It was not an order, nor was it an obligation, but she knew it was something she had to do.

*“...”*

“Conflict resolved. Good work Undertaker. And everyone else too.”

Lena deliberately called out using the codename, and Shinn showed a wry smile.

*"Yes, good work, Handler One."*

"Okay," Raiden muttered. It seemed he was stretched in the cramped space, and spoke up.

Lena suddenly blinked. Just then.

For some reason, it seemed they had all made up their minds, with Lena excluded. She was forced to watch them, flabbergasted.

*"Fido, you done with the reloading?"*

There was a silence, and they seemed to be waiting for something. *"Fido? Ahh, that 'Scavenger' who's always following us."*

*"We can only do our maintenance and repairs once we find a place to sleep... used up so much ammunition on the first day. It hurts."*

*"Well that's fine isn't it? Took out lots of them."*

*"I guess... well, no choice then."*

A heavy rumbling sound rang. The five of them activated their waiting "Juggernauts," and stood up.

*"Let's go — see you then, Major. Please take care of yourself."*

Lena heard the extremely common farewell greeting, and for a moment, she could not understand.

For the battle was over.

The enemy had retreated, and they had no casualties. Surely, they could return back to camp like usual on this day.

"Eh?"

The teenagers ignored Lena's concerns as they strode forth. The "Juggernauts" heavily ravaged in the intense battle gave off clattering sounds, and started chatting like children on the way to school.

*"Oh yeah, you sure we'll be fine going forward like this? There were a lot of duds fired."*

*"Yes... it certainly does seem scary since these are landmines. Shinn, do you*

*mind looking for an alternate route?”*

*“There are no other <Legion> units around, so any way is fine... duds?”*

*“Let’s talk on the way. I say, Shinn, you really don’t watch wherever you’re walking, huh?”*

They continued east, to the unknown battlefield controlled by the <Legion>.

Of course.

They would not return again.

“Wa—”

Anxiety filled her heart, her body cold as she sensed that she was about to lose something. Lena could not take it anymore, and blurted out,

“Wait, please wait...!”

It seemed everyone stopped, and turned around, waiting for her to continue. However, Lena did not know what to say. For she was the one who had shooed them. She was the one who had ordered them to die. At this point, whether she apologized or blamed herself, it was pointless to them, so she had nothing to say.

But she inadvertently blurted out,

“Please do not leave me behind!”

A moment later, Lena realized what she had just said, and froze up. *Of all things to say, this?* Shameless, and perplexing it was.

But once they heard those words, they kindly smiled.

They were kind smiles, with a tinge of bitterness. They were like older siblings headed into grade school, watching their little sister pout as she yearned to go to school too.

*“Oh, that’s a nice way to put it.”*

Raiden grinned. His voice was filled with the determination and pride of a wild beast, striding across the prairie with his strength, along with his comrades.

*“Yeah. We’re not being chased. We’re marching on. We’ll keep going on, until the very end.”*

Everyone diverted their attention towards Lena again. Their eyes, their hearts were all fixed forward, towards the future.

Lena gasped.

She could sense the feeling in their hearts. It was not rugged determination, and neither was it callousness.

They were like people who had witnessed the vast seas sparkling with blue light.

They were like children who had witnessed an endless prairie in spring, who were told by their parents that they could play however they liked.

It was exhilaration, riveting emotions that could no longer be suppressed, pure ecstasy, joy, elation, an irrepressible anticipation.

Ahh.

She could not stop them. No words could form a shackle, a yoke.

For them, it was freedom,

It was something so precious, so difficult to obtain, even though they knew that it was their burial place, and a path leading towards that land.

Once they saw that Lena had silently accepted their goodbyes, the teenagers moved on again. However, they probably saw through the lingering unwillingness in her heart, for at the very end, Shinn smile.

For the first time, he showed a hearty smile.

It was a clear smile, devoid of any pretense.

*“We shall be on our way, Major.”*

The Para-RAIDs disconnected silently.

The five blips of light vanished silently. They were beyond her jurisdiction, and they were erased from her Para-RAID contact list.

From this point onwards, they would never meet again.

Tears welled out from her eyes, forming broken trails of beads. She could not rein in her sobbing.

Lena laid prone on the console, and cried out loud.

†

The five colored flag laid out in the horizontally reciprocal manner had long faded, and it remained hanging on the wooden wall of the barracks.

From left to right, the colors were reversed, hinting at the **reversal of the values**. Oppression, discrimination, bias, violence, degradation.

To the side of the five colored flag was a vandalized image of San Magnolia, who was not holding a sharp sword breaking the yoke of oppression, but chains and shackles. She was not stomping upon the chains of oppression, but the people who were derided as swine as she maintained the smile of a Saint.

That was the Republic as seen from their eyes.

Lena reached out her speckless fingers that were properly cared for, and caressed the thoroughly battered wooden wall along with the paint on it. This mural had been around for a long time, probably when the barracks was built nine years ago, and painted by the first batch of Eighty Sixers.

It had died. Long dead was the Republic, whose citizens, including Lena, had trusted in.

They were the ones who personally tore it down, trampled upon it, and discarded it without a second thought.

She closed her eyes, and sighed. She recalled the boy who could hear the ghost of the Republic, the boy who was no longer around.

After that battle, her superiors told her to maintain a low profile before her punishment was determined. However, she boarded a transport craft to the base camp Spearhead Squadron was at. The craft was filled with the next batch of soldiers gathered from various battle zones, ready to be executed. She was only able to board this craft by threatening the weak-willed, kind-hearted logistics staff soldier.

“...Major Millize, right?”

She turned her head around, and found a mechanic who was in his fifties. Lieutenant Lev Audreht, chief of the maintenance crew.

“I heard from the kids, but I never expected you to show up here. You’re a weird one.”

He spoke with a hoarse, husky voice, and raised his chin, pointing at the barracks behind her.

“They tidied up at least, but they did not leave anything behind. There’s still some time until the new kids come in, so if you’re willing, go have a look.”

“Thank you very much. I apologize for dropping by when you are busy.”

“It’s nothing. I’ve seen a few batches of kids leave already, but you’re the first Alba who came to mourn them.”

At that moment, Lena lifted her head at his sidelong, tanned face.

“...Lieutenant Audreht. Are you,”

His hair was not grey, mixed with some white. Instead, it was silver hair, wrinkled as a result of oil stains.

“An Alba... no?”

“...”

Finally, Audreht removed his sunglasses, revealing eyes as silvery as snow.

“My wife was a Heliodor. My daughter really resembled her, and since they were taken away, I couldn’t take it, and dyed my hair to follow them. Back then, I swore to have them regain their citizenship... I was useless. Negotiations failed, and I had no choice... I could only watch them go to the battlefield, and die there.”

He took a long sigh, and scratched his head.

“...You heard of his ability? That Shinn?”

“Yes.”

“That ability’s rather famous along the eastern battlefield... when he was first assigned here, I did whisper to him, asking if there were any <Legion> looking for this shitty bastard who couldn’t protect his wife and daughter.”

“ ... ”

“I was thinking, that if they were there, I would go over and have them kill me. That brat answered that there were no <Legion> calling for my name. Hearing that... I was a little relieved. At the very least, my wife and daughter aren't left behind on the battlefield. One day, when I go over to the other side, I might be able to see them.”

The elderly mechanic chief showed a smile, somewhat forlorn, yet somewhat at peace.

But as he looked on at the distant battlefield to the east, his face was filled with sadness.

“Before every special scouting mission, I would inform every squad member of my real identity, that it was fine for them to hate me, that they could just kill me if they wanted to vent... none of the listened to me though. This time too. I'm still unable to die.”

It was as though he was complaining that he had been left behind again.

By his wife and daughter... and the many children he had watched over up to this point.

He put on his sunglasses again, probably to hide the swelling emotions, and crudely said,

“What? Didn't I say there isn't much time now? ...Hurry on.”

“Yes... thank you very much.”

She bowed to Audreht, and passed him by, entering the barracks.

The barracks made of shoddy materials was filled with grey and brown, and it was a dilapidated sight to see.

The corridor was a little white due to years of materials aging, along with the dust. The wooden floor was popping up everywhere, and as she stepped forward, it was creaking.

The cafeteria and kitchen were completely covered in oil and stains that could not be cleaned. In no way could it be considered clean.

The bathroom resembled a gas chamber from the documentaries, damp and dark. In a corner, there was something black shaking.

There was no washing machine, no vacuum cleaner, just a broom and pan, along with some pails and boards filled with jagged marks at the pond in the back garden. These were all the cleaning tools they had.

There was no sign of civilization to be seen. Lena was utterly embarrassed to think that this was the lifestyle a developed, humane country granted its people.

She came to the sleeping quarters of the Processors on the second floor. She stepped on the stairs, and the wooden floor contorted, making creaking sounds in protest.

The cramped room was filled with old, narrow pipe beds and closets. The colors had faded away due to dust, time, and sunlight, and the room was all tidied up, no presence of its original residents to be sensed, only piles of cleaned blankets, bedsheets, and pillows awaiting the next batch of residents.

The innermost room was the most spacious, for the squad leader to use. She nudged the shaky door aside, and it let out a creak.

It too contained a narrow pipe bed and a closet, but this room contained a desk too, along with items of various sizes.

An old guitar, a deck of poker cards, a tabletop game, and some working tools.

A book of crossword puzzles with its pages scattered everywhere, only spaces of unsolved ones remaining.

A sketch book without any illustrations, completely blank.

A basket containing laces and needles, with nothing done.

A small bookshelf hastily made with boards, containing various books of various genres and authors, and it seemed the owner had no particular preferences.

Perhaps they were not tidied up as they could be used for the next batch of squad members. Everything else that was created was all discarded, for they

knew they could not be left behind.

She could hear their laughter.

They knew nothing would be left behind, but these youths did their best to laugh and live through every single day.

They never succumbed to despair

They never let hatred blemish their pride.

In the harsh circumstances that could have trampled upon their dignity, they insisted upon a human dignity anyone would be proud of.

She came to the bookshelf, and found a black kitten with four white feet, seemingly wondering where the previous occupants had gone to. Outside the window, the soldiers were gathering Processors who had their photos taken.

Looking at this room, it seemed she could not find anything. She took out the book written by an author she had heard of, and flipped through it, trying to at least understand what it was about.

At this moment, something slipped out from between the pages.

“Ah.”

She picked it up. A few pieces of paper. The one on top was a photo depicting a group of people standing before a building.

She could see the reversed five colored flag. The photo was taken at this camp. Standing at the front were the maintenance crew members dressed in jumpsuits, along with twenty or so teenagers.

“...!”

Lena understood without any explanation needed. They were the members of Spearhead Squadron that had existed until the previous day. It was likely the first photo of the squad when it was formed, including Shinn, Raiden, Seo, Krena, Angel, and the other members.

The size of this photo that was used for a case file was not big to begin with, and to ensure that all twenty four Processors and mechanics were included, every single person was small and blurry. For some reason, even the old “Scavenger” was included. That was likely to be Fido.

It was the first time she had seen them. As the photo was too small however, and as it was taken from too far away, she was unable to see their appearances clearly. However, she could see them standing erratically, facing the camera, smiling serenely.

The second piece of paper contained a messy, strong handwritten note of a male.

*“If you’re looking for us now, and find this piece of paper, that makes you a real idiot.”*

This time, she gasped.

It was Raiden. He did not sign off, but it was clearly written for Lena.

*If you’re looking for us now, and find this piece of paper, that makes you a real idiot.*

*Are you not the same? You left this piece of paper for me, this one line.*

The piece of paper underneath had the names of many written messily. Obviously, it was written so that Lena could tell whoever was at which position.

*“Writing my name now. You’re probably crying away since you can’t tell who is who here.”*

Seo.

*“Keep that cat. Since you like to act nice, isn’t it fine?”*

Krena.

*“It does not have a name, so please come up with a cute name for it, Major.”*

Angel.

She held the paper with trembling hands. The feelings rising in her heart filled her chest.

They left words for her. They left their final words for her, who could not fight alongside them, who could not save them, and could only stamp on their heads, saying useless, pretty words.

The last piece of paper contained words written by Shinn. The tidy words and nonchalant attitude was so typical of him.

*“If one day, we arrive at the end of our journey, do you mind providing flowers for us?”*

It was a simple line of words, yet it contained a proverbial message.

At the very end of their lives was the freedom Shinn and the others yearned for. Lena had to take a step forward to reach their destination.

Lena too could continue to move on.

*Do not succumb to despair, nor trample upon the dignity of humanity, and keep on moving forward, until the very end of your life.*

*Yes, I believe you can, until the very end.*

A tear fell down her cheek, filled with some warmth, and moroso anguish. Despite this, she showed a smile.

Shinn had said that it was only a matter of time until the Republic fell. It was destined to fail, for it remained arrogant, and forgot to protect itself.

Perhaps this country could not avoid its impending doom. That day might be tomorrow.

But she was to continue fighting until the very end, never to give up, to live on, and to struggle until the very end, just like those indomitable people who proudly lived from beginning to end.

To keep fighting. Until the end of her destiny, until her final moments.

# Epilogue - Rise of the Bloody Queen

No country will scoff at the notion of denying pigs human rights,

Thus, as long as their language differs, their skin color differs, their ancestors are deemed to be of different tribes, they will be found pigs taking on the appearance of humans.

By suppressing and slaughtering them, surely there is no issue per say with regards to human rights violations.

The moment every person rationalized it, the moment every person deemed it as appropriate, the Republic of San Magnolia began its descent towards destruction, and at the same time, that was its demise.

~Vladlena Millize (Memoirs)

The remains of the five Republic units were leaning upon each other, enclosed in a case of hardened glass, remaining there for eternity.

The location was along the streets of the city controlled by the **Republican Geade Federation**. Under the blue sky that was as clear as the best sapphire was a beautiful, fleeting scenery, as though isolated scenery. It was along the border of the old San Magnolia Republic and Geade Empire, a little closer to the latter.

Standing in the glass protection zone she was permitted to enter was eighteen year old Vladlena Millize, looking up at the remains of the “Juggernaut” that resembled a headless knight. A tinge of red was on her

flowing silver hair, landing upon the shoulders of her now black Republican Army uniform.

Before they were encased in glass, they had been white armor thoroughly weathered, covered with scars of various sizes. The burn marks from cannon blasts or lingering heat remained distinguishable, and the severely contorted frames could barely be pieced together to its original form. The “Scavenger” lying by the side of the remains had a line of words that could barely be seen.

*Fido. Our loyal*— the rest of the words were swallowed by the blast, never to be known again.

However, she could guess whatever it was.

Why did Shinn not give that cat a name, yet named the “Scavenger?” Only then did she realize.

To them, who lived and died as fated on the battlefield, only the ones that fought alongside them and died along with them were their comrades. Only those that managed to survive the same battlefields, fought until the very end in a corner of the battlefield, and experienced the same war, could be considered a comrade.

The five additional containers Fido transported were all discarded. Each container would be discarded once depleted, so as to ease the load. It was said that the container within Fido was almost empty, and given that it was still <Legion> controlled territory, the distance travelled probably added up.

The five of them, expected to last no more than a few days, spent an entire month, used up a month’s worth of supplies, and reached the very end.

They crossed the contested area on the side of the Republic, even passing through the <Legion> controlled area, and approached the contested area of the Federation. It was at this point that they had finally ran out of supplies... and probably died in battle.

This was where their journey ended.

Shinn left behind the plates with the five hundred and seventy six names engraved upon them, and it was said that the plates were discovered amidst the wreckage of the “Juggernaut.” That plate was taken out temporarily when

the glass coffin was made, duplicated, the names recorded, and returned.

Two years ago, Shinn came here. However, the Republic could not follow in their steps.

The Republic was wiped out. As Shinn had predicted back then, it fell due to its arrogance.

Since then, Lena was appointed as Handler for another squadron, in charge of commanding its operations.

She did not fight alongside them. She knew very well that all she could do on the battlefield was sacrifice. If they died, that was it, and given that she could not fight alongside Shinn and the others until the very end, the image of a tragic heroine did not match her at all.

She had submitted her report on the “Black Sheep,” “Shepherd,” and the long distance cannon, but her superiors had dismissed them as the ramblings of the Eighty Sixers and unconfirmed rumors, discarding them aside. Even the lack of maintenance of the interception cannon was never resolved.

The battles in that zone were just as intense, the Processors were sacrificed one after another. However, Lena did not simply have them die, but personally led the battle, commanding her subordinates without mercy, squeezing out every bit of their blood. Before she knew it, Lena had gained a moniker.

“Bloody Regina.”

It was probably derived from her name. Though it resembled an antagonist from a third rate movie, Lena was not particularly concerned with it. She had trampled upon them, forced them to battle, and yet was unable to save any of them. Such a moniker was befitting of her cruelty and arrogance.

However, the survival rates of her squadron was far superior to the others, and even after a year, there was no need for reshuffling. Slowly, the squadron under her charge were dubbed “The Queen’s Men.”

Whenever there were no missions, she went about visiting those that had opposed the containment, those that had hidden their friends or relatives, ex-

Handlers who resigned when facing the retribution of their conscience, and recorded the names of the Eighty Sixers they remembered, their stories, their words. The country had purged their existence, but it could not purge their memories. So she thought, if one day, the Republic was to be wiped out, she wanted the whole world to know of this history.

And the watershed moment happened.

It was the National Day of the Republic. The high school valedictorian that year stood on stage, delivering a speech at the rally. That boy was of similar age to Lena, and she could only remember his eyes filled with rage.

*“Of my classmates, many of them fought against the <Legion>, and died.”*

There was some slight commotion in the audience, showing their sympathies to the speaker. Some of them wept.

The boy coldly lowered his gaze upon them, and suddenly roared agitatedly.

*“They are derided by this country, called Eighty Sixers. —They died on the battlefield, but the one who sentenced them to death is this country! How long is this going to last!?”*

Nobody in the audience agreed with them.

Some mocked him for not knowing the difference between a human and a pig. Some were as outraged as he was, but quietly bit their lips. Most of them remained callous, however, and paid no heed to his words, acting as though they were corpses.

The enemy attacks from the North had always been the weakest, but that night, an unprecedentedly massive army suddenly launched an assault.

The defenses were immediately overwhelmed by the massive differences in numbers.

They did not relay information to the Handler that their forces were all wiped out. It was not due to revenge, but because the Handlers who should have fulfilled their responsibilities were all partying away and celebrating, not one of them synchronized with their subordinates. Since not a single one did fulfill his duty, there was no need for them to report.

Most of the interception cannons could not be activated, and the few that could fire normally were blown apart by the Scorpions, along with the landmine zone. The few shots that barely got out were shot down by the Stachelschwein before they could explode.

And even the last line of defenses, the <Grand Mur>, was easily penetrated.

The Morpho.

A railgun type <Legion> that shoots projectiles at an astonishing speed of eight thousand meters per second.

It was a new type of enemy Spearhead Squadron had encountered and reported, only for the report to be discarded by the superiors.

Faced with the nightmarish destructive power of the railgun and the heavy bombardments, the defensive fortifications were simply a sitting duck, targets that were instantly obliterated. By the time the government had understood what was going on, the <Legion> had invaded the Eighty Five Zones.

Over the past eleven years, the citizens had left all fighting responsibility to the Eighty Sixers, so naturally, they could not fight.

A week after the <Grand Mur> had fallen.

The Republic was wiped out.

It was no punishment, for none of them died regretting their degradation and callousness. Most of them begrudged the incompetence of others, lamenting their innocence and untimely deaths. For the sinners who knew not of their deeds, death was no punishment to them.

As she was in the first area, Lena managed to avoid the assault from the north. At the same time, she was amply prepared, and managed to implement countermeasures.

She had all the heavy cannons near the landmines fire at the latter, blasted a path through, and opened the gates of the <Grand Mur>. With the hidden function Arnett had implemented, she had all surviving Processors synchronized, and requested for them to fight within the Eighty Five zeons.

“The Queen’s Men,” members of the squadrons under her charge, and other

forces responded to her call.

Of course, not all of them were willing to fight back out of the goodness of their heart. Most of them were aiming for the better living conditions inside the Eighty Five areas, including the electricity and the production plants, and others came along to help their comrades who were stuck in other squads and Concentration Camp.

Once these forces were gathered, Lena led the defenses.

A few Albas rode on the spare “Juggernauts” and went into despair, and more citizens were too busy tripping over, falling into despair. Some unabashedly showed their rage and disdain for the Eighty Sixers, but this time, the situation had changed as compared to how it was back then. The powerful weapons and firepower were not in their hands, but in the Eighty Sixers’.

In the face of the ferocious enemy, the Eighty Sixers continued to focus on battling, and endured, wanting no part of any foolish infighting. If the battle continued a little longer however, the consequences would have been unpredictable.

Two months into the defensive battle, they received reinforcements from a neighboring country.

Their reinforcements came from a country in the Far East that had crossed the <Legion> controlled territories, and their borders.

The Geade Federation, which had vanquished the Empire, and was reborn as a Republic. While most of the <Legion> was concentrated in the north, they broke through the thinned eastern battlefield.

Soon after the Empire declared war, it was destroyed due to a civilian revolution, and what the other countries heard was a wireless transmission of the last stronghold. It seemed that in their efforts to eliminate the Empire, the Federation had deemed the <Legion> as enemy, and had been fighting for ten years. Many of its people voluntarily joined the army, for it firmly believed that protecting their country, their compatriots, was their duty as citizens, that they admired the ideals of a Republic, so much so that they could destroy their own country, and slowly regained their lands.

With the most advanced weapons and an elite military, the tide began to change. The first area was reclaimed, but there was friction between them.

The citizens of the Republic celebrated the arrival of the Federation, but things did not end there.

For some reason, the Federation knew very well of the atrocities that the Republic did to the Federation's people and the Colorata deemed as Eighty Sixers.

Before they attacked the Eighty Five Zones, the Federation saved the surviving Eighty Sixers from the Concentration Camps and frontline bases, and they had witnessed the tragic fates of the oppressed.

Since you hate other colors, you can dye your flag completely white. So the Commander of the reinforcements barked at the President and Inner Cabinet of the Republic.

The Federation decided to prioritize the protection of the Eighty Sixers, that if they were willing, they would be granted citizenship, unconditionally.

The Albas too had the bare minimum of support, but the investigations into the extent of oppression was prioritized.

They found a vast amount of personal particulars files in the underground warehouse of the national military headquarters, and these files were considered to be relatively well preserved. A certain official of the human resource branch had secretly preserved and hidden the records of the KIA. The Federation was stunned by the vast amount of information, and was skeptical that the recent batches of KIA were all young soldiers, but they kindly accepted the understanding that there were a few kind souls in the Republic.

However, they found the records of those detained in the Concentration Camps, heard the survivors describe their circumstances, and found a vast amount of bones near the Camps and bases that were not buried in time. Their attitude became much colder as a result. Also, once they came across the records of human experimentation, trading of infants and babies, and footage of soldiers slaughtering them, the Federation deemed the citizens of the Republic as no different from trash.

The Federation could have ceased all aid to the Albas, but they continued to provide the bare minimum.

Perhaps this aid was a form of punishment. *Scum you may be, but we shall not do the same thing to you, or we too will become like you.*

Those who knew their own sin would be ashamed. Those swines that did not were no different from being dead. This was a silent judgment.

After reclaiming the zones to the north of the first zone, the Federation required officers of the old Republic to bolster their ranks, as a commander for the counterattack forces, or an adviser.

Most of them hesitated, but Lena answered the call. Thus, she stood here.

Lena left the glass case, and from the street, she picked up a little bag along with a cage containing a black cat with white legs, returning to the ranks. Standing in this garden of a spring rhapsody were the remains of the “Juggernauts,” along with the stone plates containing five hundred and seventy six names. These were their gravestones that had reached this place, after all the battles, after all the time they had survived.

As she had no idea the graves were here, she had not prepared any flowers, and could never do so.

She did not arrive here on her own strength, and had no right to present flowers to them.

Faced with the higher ups of the Federation awaiting her, she lowered her head slightly.

“My apologies, Your Excellency. I have kept you waiting.”

“Not at all. In no way is giving time to mourn the dead waiting.”

Showing a calm smile was a middle-aged, high ranking Jet, who resembled a scholar more than a high ranking government official. His round framed glasses had high degree in the lenses, his black hair had some white in it, and he was dressed in an ordinary red.

His kind eyes that showed no offense were narrowed at Lena, who was

dressed in black, a part of her hair dyed red.

“Red symbolizes the blood that flows, while black represents the sending off of the dead, ‘Bloody Regina...’ .in fact, many in the Federation felt there was no need to save the scum of the Republic, that they should simply protect their Colorata compatriots — but seeing people like you make us think that yes, our decision remains correct. Welcome, **Colonel** Millize. The Geade Federation welcomes your arrival.”

Seeing his welcoming smile, Lena showed a perturbed one, shaking her head. The flowing blood belonged to others, and the ones who died were all her subordinates. For the black clothed Queen who was stained in blood, such praise was hard to accept.

The Federation official watched her body of purity in a doting manner. Before she knew it, there were a few young Federation officers standing behind him, all dressed in the steel-colored Federation uniform.

“Please come. I shall introduce you as the commander of our new squad.”

“Understood.”

Before she walked off, Lena again looked back at the graves behind her.

The four legged spiders and the remains of those that followed were leaning upon each other, sleeping silently. That was where the footsteps of those youths ended, the youths who fought their way through this cruel life, and smiled on along the way through their journey.

The war had not ended. The <Legion> forces still occupied a majority of the continent. At this moment, there were still people who continued to fight, yearning to live.

Fight. Until the very last moment, until the last <Legion> unit is defeated.

For them, only those that struggled until the very end, for the sake of arriving at their destination, could enter the promised land.

Lena turned her head around adamantly, and took a step forward. The five officers of similar age saluted in unison. She walked towards them, towards another battlefield awaiting her.

For the sake of fighting on, for the sake of survival.

## Restart—Activate

The five soldiers remained at ease as they watched the officer girl of the Old Republic Army exit the glass case, approaching the President of the Federation. They were all in their teens, yet they showed poise far beyond their age, the brand new steel-colored uniforms on them surprisingly fitting.

He frowned as he spotted the pretty Selena girl with slightly reddened silver hair and a black uniform; next to him, the tall Vice Commander muttered,

“Hey... is it really her? It feels like... she’s different from what I expected.”

“She probably has her own tale. Just like how we have ours,” he flatly answered.

“I guess you’re right,” so came the reply. He glanced aside at the Vice Commander who was smiling away. It had been two years since he started wearing this steel colored uniform of the Federation Army, yet it seemed a little off. This applied not only to himself, but also to the other four.

The remaining three remained in position, not moving a hair as they muttered, “What’s with the ‘Bloody Regina?’ How rude. That doesn’t fit her at all.”

“Hey, you think she can recognize us?”

“Hmm... sure will be happy if she can, but it’ll be interesting if she can’t...”

Amidst the murmurs, the duo seemed to have ended their conversation as the President led the girl towards them. The Vice Commander and the other three yapping away immediately went quiet, and resumed the stern, cold expressions from before. Such might be the result of the Federation Army training, or perhaps it was part of their act.

The five of them spotted the approaching President and the girl who was to be their superior again, tucked their legs together, and saluted in unison.

The girl saluted back with a motion slightly different from the Federation’s,

and spoke up.

Her expression was a little grim, and stiff.

“This is Colonel Vladlena Millize of the San Magnolia Republic Army. Pleased to be of acquaintance.”

Huh, looks like she did not figured it out.

The quintet quickly exchanged childish looks of those who had pulled off a prank successfully.

And he, their leader, acted as representative, speaking up, “Pleased to be of acquaintance, but not exactly. This is the first time we are meeting though.”

Eh? The silver white eyes widened. He looked down at her, smiling.

“It has been a while, **Handler One.**”



# Afterword

Garterbelts are romantic, you know? Hello everyone, this is Asato Asato.

Of course, this weird name is a pen name. The origin is based on my actual name and “88.”

To you, who picked up this book and have yet to read it, I do believe this work will greatly interest you.

To you, who picked up this book with much skepticism, I do hope that you will be entertained by this somewhat peculiar work.

And to you, who have read this book, thank you very much. What do you think? This volume includes mecha warfare, a boy’s encounter with a girl, despair, and other various elements, so if any of them is to tug at your heartstrings, I shall be honored.

Also, as an author, I enjoyed myself while writing this. This is the kind of story I like to read! This is the story including all the elements I like after all! This is written in the way I wanted it! As to why this work won the Grand Prize though, I really, really have no idea.

Well, I greatly exceeded the number of pages specified for the submission, so I had to weep and cut away some elements. One of them was the part about the garterbelt (a descriptive scene), but I could add it in when editing the script. Garterbelts are really cute. Erotic. Erotically cute.

If you are one of us, please enjoy the super-duper cute Lena drawn by the hands of Shirabi-sama, and marvel at her absolute territory decorated by these tantalizing garterbelts.

If you are not, please allow me to explain a few points about this work before you feel disgust.

>The plot of this work is based on the black history of a certain Axis country

and a certain Federation. However, this does not mean I have any hatred or bias against those two countries. I obtained some extra material for use in this work.

>The common terms of “pigs” used in this work has vibes of verbal abuse and derogatory abuse, but it does not mean that I really hate pigs, instead that I really like them. Pork is really delicious. Fried pork cutlets, fatty pork, I love them.

>Please do not read too much into the Para-RAID theory, the combat capabilities of the various weapons, and the pronunciation of various languages. Some parts were changed accordingly as needed. The “collective” subconsciousness in particular was a deliberately false explanation on my part.

>This work is set in a fictional world, but uses international metric measurements for easier visualization. Also, I did not use the Japanese units of measurements or yardage for this work, simply because I do not understand it.

>This work is set in a fictional world, but the Bible and Mr. Lamarck’s works are featured... the reasons shall be for you to imagine.

...Enough with the tomfoolery. Following this, the thanksgiving.

To the editors, Kiyose-sama and Tsuchiya-sama. Thank you for everything. You are able to give thorough views and analysis in parts I remain uncertain of, and I feel really relieved, sensing that the quality of the work has vastly improved; every interaction with the both of you has been enjoyable.

To Shirabi-sama, who drew powerful, proud looking characters with pretty expressions, thank you very much for that. I did receive a draft of Shinn in full armor that was really cool, and was really troubled, wondering if I should change the setting of this work to fit this illustration.

To I-IV-sama. Though you were hampered by my nonsensical demand to have “weak, useless machines,” you managed to design a wonderful, ominous weapon full of coldness, the super cool design of the “Juggernaut,” even including some amazing blueprints full of details. I really want to thank you for the unbreakable <Legion> you drew, and the cute Fido, which now I want one beside me. Thank you very much.

And to you, holding this book in hand. Thank you very much. The content of this volume has ended, but the story has yet to end, so please continue your support.

So then, I do wish to be able to bring you into a greenhouse of faux honor and glory. Into the battlefield of blood and burned metal, the skies, the stars, the breeze, and the flowers, and to experience everything along with them.

When writing this afterword, BGM: Sidonia OP (Angela).

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# 86 - Eighty Six - Volume 01

Written by **Asato Asato**

Illustrated by **Shirabi**

Translated by **Teh Ping**

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From [Baka-Tsuki](#).